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ROAD TRIPPIN':
TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ROAD NARRATIVES
AND PETROCULTURES FROM *ON THE ROAD* TO *THE ROAD*

A Dissertation
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
For the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy
In the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

SCOTT M OBERNESSER

December 2018

ABSTRACT

“Road Trippin:’ Twentieth-Century American Road Narratives and Petrocultures from *On The Road* to *The Road*” examines late-twentieth century U.S. road narratives in an effort to trace the development of American petrocultures geographically and culturally in the decades after World War II. The highway stories that gain popularity throughout the era trace not simply how Americans utilize oil, but how the postwar American oil ethos in literature, film, and music acts upon and shapes human interiority and vice versa. Roads and highways frame my critique because they are at once networks of commerce transportation *and* producers of a unique, romantic national mythos that impacts American literary and extra-literary textuality throughout the late-twentieth century. My methodology draws on literary, environmental, and material culture studies, but rather than dwell on the substance itself, the project traces oil’s presence in the aesthetic stuff of our lives: the novels, films, television shows, popular songs, and memoirs that structure conceptions of individualism, freedom, mobility, race, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, I rely heavily upon interdisciplinary lenses derived from literary, film, and affect theories. Petroaffect, or the ways in which oil and oil culture shape and reshape human interiority, reveals how people are in a sense manufactured by oil as psychological or even spiritual beings. Tracing petroculture’s trajectory throughout late-twentieth century road narratives —road novels, outlaw trucker movies, popular music, memoir, and apocalyptic fictions—demonstrates that oil’s material, ideological, and environmental effects and affects are vital to the formation of the petromodern American.

DEDICATION

For all of my friends, family, and colleagues who patiently put up with me during the years spent researching and writing this project. In particular, I would like to thank Karen, Jay, and Cristie for reading copious drafts, offering notes and guidance, and ultimately helping me craft a project I am very proud of.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mapping Petroculture:
Or, When the Road Is More Than Just a Road

“The engine was a big 4,257-cc straight-six, and sitting on his worktable it looked like some vast mechanical heart—which was what it was, he supposed. So many of man’s inventions—the syringe, the sword, the pen, the gun—were metaphorical cocks, but the internal combustion engine had to have been dreamt up by a man who had looked upon the human heart.”
—Joe Hill, *NOS4A2: A Novel*

Mapping Petroculture

On July 23, 1958, Simon and Schuster issued an in-house news bulletin applauding the triumphs of their newest regional travel guide: the MOBIL GUIDE, a 330-page dollar book registering “good food, lodging and sight-seeing” in Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico, Louisiana and Oklahoma (News). The guidebook, co-published with the Magnolia Petroleum Company (a subsidiary of Mobil Oil), had become “the fastest-moving book of any kind” in the five-state area, the sales far exceeding those of any other book (News). Most copies—roughly half of the initial printing of 100,000—were distributed at Mobil stations along highways throughout the five-state region. The remaining copies were sold at book stores, department stores and “Pocket Book outlets,” such as “drug stores, newsstands and variety stores” (News). But those copies quickly disappeared: after just three months, department stores and book stores placed new orders, requesting five to ten times the copies of their initial orders. Simon and Schuster measured the rate of sale by reaching out to selected distributors. “I have had my Mobil Guide books for about two months,” starts one reply. “I believe I was about the first one to receive the

guide here—first 2 dozen were selling rapidly so in about three weeks I bought 4 dozen more. I now have 3 ½ dozen on hand. Notice quite a few of my tourists have one when coming in. Some local people have bought the guide” (Berger). Another distributor states, “Very good for us—customers seem to like it! We are ordering additional copies with regular stock order” (Berger).

In its initial form, The MOBIL GUIDE consisted of two sections: listed recommendations for over 1500 restaurants, hotels, and roadway attractions; and road maps for each state with Mobil stations prominently marked by a M surrounded by a large red circle or square.¹ Publishers attributed the travel guide’s success to a “unique system of relative ratings” (a star system to “signify degrees of merit” and checkmarks to “indicate especially good buys”) that helped motorists and domestic tourists quickly and efficiently determine where they might best spend their time and money.² The Magnolia Petroleum Company had “prepared the GUIDE with painstaking care,” investing over \$50,000 “on research alone,” with another \$40,000 on promotion (Affiliated Publishers). The MOBIL GUIDE assured distributors the book would increase commercial traffic. Extensive advertising ranging from posters, radio ads, banners, envelope stuffers, and window streamers all but guaranteed the GUIDE would increase revenue if the distributing businesses themselves were willing to promote the GUIDE as well. A 1958 order form released to businesses recommended in the guide states, “Tourists will love the guide. In fact, your local patrons will want it as well. Recommend it to them, just as MOBIL GUIDE recommends you.” The strategy worked: Worth Matthis of the Alamo News and Book Store in

¹ The circular border indicated minor fuel stations, while the square border indicated stations with garages and mechanics.

² One star = “Good, better than average;” two stars = “Very good;” three stars = “Excellent;” four stars = “Outstanding—worth a special effort to reach;” and five stars = “One of the best in the country” (Affiliated Publishers). A checkmark indicated, “In addition, an unusually good value, relatively inexpensive” (Affiliated Publishers).

San Antonio reported selling “one copy every two days” to “enthusiastic” customers (Berger). Travelers were led to the Alamo News and Book Store due to its inclusion in the guide; at the same time, the store acted as a dispensary for additional copies. “Advertising seems to have helped considerably,” Matthis writes, “because most of the buyers either have asked specifically for the book, or walked directly to it upon entering the store.” In other words, the MOBIL GUIDE directed travelers to certain businesses and experiences, curating a specific brand of visitation networked through the very establishments that agreed to sell the guide itself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mobil stations became the most easily recognizable features on the maps, specifically identifying the appropriate stations at which to fuel up and the distances between those stations.

The foundations of my project are in the roads and highways that facilitate the growth and progress of oil culture after World War II and the road narratives that shape both postwar American geographies *and* the American’s imaginary. I begin with the MOBIL GUIDE for two reasons. First, the MOBIL GUIDE is a tangible, textual artifact that suggests deep ties between roads and the proliferation of what scholars have come to refer to as petrocultures, meaning the cultural, social, and political impacts of oil as a powerful material and geopolitical resource.³ Framing postwar petrocultures through the history and textuality of roads and highways generates new points of discourse regarding the sociocultural impacts of petromodernity, what Stephanie LeMenager defines as “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (67). The United States’ oil surplus after World War II sets in motion a series of

³ Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman explain, at the first gathering of the Petrocultures Research Group in 2010, participants identified “existing activist and environmental texts advocating for renewable and sustainable energy, and historical studies of oil and energy systems... [but] investigations of the social imaginaries brought into being by the energies of fossil fuels—which is what we termed ‘petrocultures’—were in short supply” (14)

infrastructural, political, and cultural changes that come to define postwar American life. The MOBIL GUIDE consolidates the proliferation of twentieth century road maps and highway travel guides that signal a national trend towards highway building, road culture, and automobility.

Perhaps more pointedly, the rise of the petroleum infrastructure after World War II has a distinct impact upon the American literary mind. The second reason I begin with the MOBIL GUIDE is because I have come to understand roads as a primary site of petroculture's cultural, political, and environmental impacts during the late-twentieth century, particularly within mid-late century artistic/cultural productions. While much critical attention has focused on oil materialism, on the resource itself and the environmental and geopolitical impacts of oil, little of that scholarship has focused on the "social transition" needed in order to "support and enable energy transition" (Wilson et al, 4). Roads, and the stories that spring forth from that space, characterize a specific evolution of American identity between the late-1940s and the 2000s rooted in the promises of "easy oil."⁴ Midcentury road novels, crafted within the era of easy oil, set narratological and imaginative precedents for later literary road texts. Roads and highways are the infrastructure that facilitate oil's economic and material ubiquity after World War II, but more importantly they accelerate ideologies of resource consumption, identity creation, and artistic expression that define the postwar American mind. Road culture constructs an American mythos of freedom and mobility that resonates throughout literature, film, and music, throughout issues of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. In mapping American commerce and

⁴ "Easy oil" refers to midcentury U.S. oil surplus and the national, ideological securities born out of that surplus. "Easy oil" works in opposition to "Tough Oil," oil that is more difficult to extract and carries a correspondingly "devastating scale of its externalities" (LeMenager, 3).

pleasure, the MOBIL GUIDE indicates the imaginative force of petroculture in shaping and reshaping human interiority, commodifying such force in an effort to cultivate oil capitalism.⁵

I pose the MOBIL GUIDE as a courier by which we might approach the earliest phases of road narratives, developed out of a longer history of American travel literature. As early as the nineteenth century, travel books had constructed artistic and cultural capital linked across the nation's vast regional, social, and political variances.⁶ Between 1880 and 1940, Marquerite Shaffer claims, the emerging tourist industry commodified more artistic endeavors and "actively promoted tourism as a ritual of American citizenship" (4). The wide array of participants—"commercial clubs, railroad corporations, the National Park Service, good-roads advocates, guidebook publishers"—called on Americans to invest in public spaces and in so doing shape cultural, commercial, and infrastructural development along the lines of westward expansion. Shaffer explains that, "in teaching tourists what to see and how to see it, promoters invented and mapped an idealized American history and tradition across the American landscape, defining an organic nationalism that linked national identity to a shared territory and history" (4).

In the 1920s and 1930s, extensive highway building shifted this nationalism to the road. Nicolas T. Parsons explains the "first age of independent motorised [sic] tourism" throughout the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by simple, cheap guidebooks that catered to a growing core of diverse travelers (252). Two Depression-era federal projects continued to document domestic travel as art, the Historical section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), but the guidebook was nonetheless trimmed down during the interwar

⁵ I use "oil capitalism" and "oil-petrochemical-capitalism" to indicate to evolutions of the petroleum infrastructure: "oil capitalism" refers to the earliest midcentury moments, before the proliferation of petrochemistry in domestic commodities. "Oil-petrochemical-capitalism" refers to the era of American capitalism *after* petrochemicals become ubiquitous in American products (Buell, 81)

⁶ The genre comprised popular texts from Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, (1819), to Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1844) and Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).

period, streamlined and simplified.⁷ By the 1950s, Parsons claims the guidebook (altruistically) targeted youth culture specifically, assisting the “penniless student” on wayward adventures. What Parson’s overlooks in his analysis is the commodification of the travel guide genre by oil companies in an effort to “secure increased market expanse and penetration” (Jakle and Schulle, 52). The travel guidebook continued as a form of resource and commodity control, a structure of power that crafted class and taste and educated Americans on how and where they ought to experience the nation. Beginning in the interwar period and culminating in postwar road narratives, to experience the nation was to be on the road.

Twenties and thirties-era highway travel guides made clear that domestic travel no longer relied on rails or trails but rather the nation’s roads and highways—reinforcing petroculture as America’s future through infrastructure, industry, and pleasure. Concurrently, competing oil companies (formed after the breakup of Standard Oil in 1911) with a glut of supply expanded from strict infrastructure building to cultural branding. In *The Gas Station in America*, John A. Jakle and Keith A. Schulle explain that oil companies “made their profits primarily at the refinery level” (52). During periods of oil surplus, specifically the 1920s-1930s and the 1950s-1960s, oil companies were more concerned about branding, distribution, and consumer base than they were about the material resource itself. Within the auspices of independent automobility, the guidebook became the Standard Oil Road Map, the Shell Motor Road Guide, or the Sunoco Highway Guide. By the post-war era these disparate travel guides, compiled and published independently of one another, were absorbed by larger corporate bodies, thus becoming larger

⁷ The FSA compiled photographs of “roadside” culture, “transforming the mundane into art,” whereas the FWP produced a “remarkable series of state and city guides for the domestic market” (Parsons, 259). In *The Gas Station in America*, John A. Jakle and Keith A. Schulle note that famous photographers such as Russel Lee, Sol Libsohn, Gordon Parks, and John Vachon worked in coordination with the FSA (24). In *Worth the Detour*, Parsons notes that the FWP “kick-started the career of authors such as [John] Cheever, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright” (259)

industries in and of themselves. M. Lincoln Schuster, president of Simon and Schuster, expressed his pleasant surprise at the MOBIL GUIDE's success in a short address. "'The bulk of our initial printing has now been sold,' he said, 'We anticipate the necessity of a second printing very soon—a development that exceeds our expectations this early in the game'" (News). The MOBIL GUIDE initially covered only the south-central United States. When the Magnolia Petroleum Company was officially incorporated into Mobil Oil in 1959, the guidebook expanded: new guides were published annually with versions for each geographical region of the nation. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the MOBIL GUIDE became *the* American travel guidebook—only recently overtaken with the advent of GPS mapping in the digital era. Schuster's reference to a "game" might have been more accurate than he knew. Instructed by the MOBIL GUIDE, midcentury Americans committed to petroculture on the road. The road trip became both an annual family excursion and an exercise in postwar, suburban dissidence, paradoxically a staple of the nuclear family's hegemonic security and a paradigmatic attempt to destabilize fifties-era containment. This was petro-modernity's rendering of the frontier narrative—and therein an unconscious national commitment to petroleum futures.

The MOBIL GUIDE serves as one example of the United States' increasing commitment to petroculture, automobility, and oil capitalism throughout the late-twentieth century. Sarah Frohardt-Lane explains that during the war nationalism was linked with driving; however, strict oil rations limited material distribution to wartime efforts and limited personal consumption (92). The end of the war was correspondingly "followed by an attempt to stabilize" the otherwise catastrophically irregular oil industry—an industry of "boom or bust" (Buell, 81). After years of tense management and rationing during the war, oil companies sought to domestically repurpose oil surplus. Frederick Buell explains that the "postwar exuberance" of the 1950s and 1960s "saw

a new expansion of consumer society” (81). The GUIDE’s early sales correlate with a surge in domestic tourism after World War II, when highway construction became *the* national future and American oil and automotive industries worked to “reestablish the link between tourism and nationalism during the post-war era” (Shaffer, 312). The GUIDE was marketed predominantly as an efficient way of navigating the amenities that sprouted alongside highways. And yet, Internal memos within the Magnolia Oil Company acknowledged that “the Mobil Guide [was] designed primarily to increase station traffic in the Magnolia territory” (Recommendations).⁸ The American road experience could thus only be achieved by contributing to the growth of oil capitalism. Expansion of American highways, increased automobile production, and the implementation of petrochemistry in crafting commercial products saw oil expand into nearly all facets of American life. Even “bodies,” writes Frederick Buell, “became literally oily, in what they ate, and in the cosmetics and clothes they put on; pharmaceuticals began doing the same thing for minds” (81).

The MOBIL GUIDE’s commercial success suggests the sociocultural influence oil companies wielded in the postwar era, ushering Americans to the highway while simultaneously constructing the road as a powerful American mythos. Ronald Primeau claims that “for most of this century, Americans have treated the road as a sacred space,” but since the midcentury particularly, Americans “have been fascinated by who goes on the road as well as why, when, and where they go and what they discover along the way” (1). Rather than celebrate road narratives as heroic, egalitarian, or democratic, I argue that road narratives reveal fundamental ways in which Americans have been habituated to petroculture and unmitigated consumption of material resources. Beginning with the midcentury road novel, road texts convey an acceleration

⁸ A second memo states “to create additional traffic and sales at Mobil stations” (Recommendations)

of environmental disconnect throughout the postwar era centered around petroculture, automobility, and the roads that map and facilitate the movement of petro-modernity.⁹ As they turned towards the corporate travelguides and maps of the highway, petro-consumers were invited willingly to forget the maps of nature, to believe that life itself depends upon oil. Likewise, the road increasingly became a key setting for writers' and artists' depictions of petromodern life.

What I hope to convey in this study is not simply how Americans utilize oil, but how the postwar American oil ethos in literature, film, and music acts upon and shapes human interiority—especially "the capacities to act and be acted upon" that characterize affect (Seigworth and Gregg, 1). Roads and highways frame my critique because they are at once networks of commerce transportation *and* producers of a unique, romantic national mythos that impacts American literary and extra-literary textuality throughout the late-twentieth century. Roads appear as spaces to be acted upon by the *driver*. I claim that by examining road narratives, we can observe the opposite phenomenon: how the *road* shapes the driver. My methodology draws on literary, environmental, and material culture studies, but rather than dwell on the substance itself, I trace oil's presence in the aesthetic stuff of our lives: the novels, films, television shows, popular songs, and memoirs that structure conceptions of individualism, freedom, mobility, race, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, I pair petroculture studies with affect theory, claiming the road narrative exposes what Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg call "visceral forces," forces "that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability" (1). The

⁹ By "environmental disconnect," I mean specifically a rupture between the human relationship to the environment and the expectations of petromodern life.

effects of postwar petro-consumption can be seen in certain responses on the body, responses engendered in and formed by cultural productions. Petroaffect, or the ways in which oil and oil culture shape and reshape human interiority, reveals how people are in a sense manufactured by oil as psychological or even spiritual beings.

Tracing petroculture's trajectory throughout late-twentieth century road narratives —road novels, outlaw trucker movies, popular music, memoir, and apocalyptic fictions—approaches oil's material, ideological, and environmental effects and affects as vital to the formation of the petromodern American.

Reading the Road: Petroculture and the Road Narrative

Energy and oil have informed a number of important historical and literary studies since the 1990s, beginning with Daniel Yergin's extensive oil history *The Prize* (1990) and Amitav Ghosh's critique of petrofiction in 1992. Within environmental criticism, oil has been historically archived alongside larger commentaries about energies or the material misuse of natural resources. Vaclav Smil's *Oil: A Beginner's Guide* (2008) historicizes the political, material, and environmental effects of oil, narrowing focus of his earlier and larger critique, *Energy: A Beginners Guide* (2006). In a 2011 issue of *PMLA*, one of Imre Szeman's earliest oil publications is paired with similar articles surveying wood, tallow, coal, whale oil and atomic power in an effort to reflect on the cultural implications of energy and environment. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* points to the long-lasting consumption of hydrocarbons as a major source of modern class, race, and cultural disparity and environmental disaster, where fossil-fuel consumers attempt to separate "orderly societies from those abandoned to destitution and climate chaos" (267). Oil is implicit in various other historical,

economic, and environmental critiques, ranging from the “speed politics” of Enda Duffy’s *Speed Handbook* (2009) to Eric Cazdyn and Szeman’s denunciation of globalization in *After Globalization* (2013), or Timothy Morton’s notion of “viscosity” in *Hyperobjects* (2009).

Critics have only recently begun to study oil and oil culture specifically, recognizing petroleum as the principal material accelerant of global modernity and its environmental destabilization. In the collection *Oil Culture* (2014), Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden explain, “Only in recent years, beginning with conversations about peak oil and transforming into debates about deepwater offshore drilling, fracking, and bitumen, has oil become the subject of cultural analysis for a critical mass of scholars” (xvii-xviii). Stephanie LeMenager’s *Living Oil* (2013) is a more refined inquiry into petroleum’s role in mediating human relationships to “other humans, to other life, and to things” (6). LeMenager frames her critique through region, specifically the California and Gulf of Mexico coasts, two distinct coastal ecologies plagued by oil-related environmental disasters. In the pages ahead I rely heavily on her concept “petromelancholia” as an approach to scarcity and the post-oil imaginary. Barrett and Worden’s collection takes a wider angle, including chapters on oil modernisms, petroleum textualities, oil geopolitics, and oil futures. Two current works, *After Oil* (2016) and *Materialism and the Critique of Energy* (2017), both contend the need for a more informed energopolitics that transitions from fossil fuels to renewable energies. *After Oil*, a collaborative critique of energy cultures out of the University of Alberta, argues for the rapid adoption of renewable energies, while *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, co-edited by Brent Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, “reconceives of the inseparable histories of fossil fuels and capital in order to narrate the historical development of the fossil regime, interpret its cultural formations, and develop politics suited to both resist and revolutionize energy-hungry capitalism” (Materialism). Here, I will note my work diverges from

this sort of political economy; though I wholly support the use of renewable energies, I suggest an “off-road” alternative to petroculture that relies heavily on remapping notions of material dependency and forms of consumption.

Petro-modernity’s vast material, environmental, and cultural consequences have made studies of petroculture imperative within literary criticism and environmental cultural studies. For me, the attraction to road culture develops out of two realizations: first, recognizing the road as a major site of larger environmental conflicts in the late-twentieth century; and second, acknowledging the impact of road culture in shaping my own perceptions of mobility, identity, and cultural taste. When I was growing up in the northern Rockies, driving long distances was just a part of everyday life. The fact that roads made that life possible, or that my life was a road life, never occurred to me until years later. My taste for Jack Kerouac’s road novels developed out of that reality but also opened questions about road mythologies I had not previously considered. Why do disillusioned characters take to the road to pursue some sense of contentment or satisfaction? Why does this literary trope repeat itself so often throughout the late-twentieth century? Why does driving *feel* so heroic in these texts? Is it? My project begins with *On The Road* because of petroaffect: the novel represents a pivotal moment in the development of postwar petrocultures, but it also has had an impact upon my own interiority, upon my own conceptions of the road. Before engaging the longer history of the road’s sociocultural impacts, it was important for me, and thus for my project, to first take apart and reorient the versions of petroculture constructed by Kerouac and by later texts influenced by *On The Road*.

The most recent oil culture collection, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, co-edited by Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Szeman, most closely reflects the varying methodologies I

employ in part because the collection is interested in aspects of petro-modernity that are not obviously accounted for in political economy, new materialism, or geopolitics. *Petrocultures* begins with the structures and conveniences of petro-modernity and ends with the post-oil, asking “what it would mean if human life were no longer deeply shaped by the consumption of fossil fuels” (Oil). The collection critiques a range of petroleum impacts, specifically the infusion of oil culture within the public imagination. I hope to add to this discourse, showing how deeply petroculture penetrates culture at large while also positing discursive off-road alternatives in literature. If oil has so utterly “transformed everyday life in the twenty-first century,” I claim it is within literature and extra-literary texts that we might conceive of a world (a body and a mind) beyond the boundaries of petro-modernity (Wilson et al, 3).

These pioneering projects draw distinct material, cultural, and political links to petroculture; most importantly, each expresses an urgent need for petroleum alternatives. The growing body of petroculture scholarship makes an important contribution to ecocriticism at large, expanding available texts and issues that impact environmental criticism. I look to contribute to this effort, examining texts that might only seem tangentially environmental in hopes of developing new on-ramps and off-ramps into environmental cultural studies. Further, the scholarship surveyed above begins to reveal the deep ties between oil capitalism and environmental disaster. Likewise, I emphasize ecological disarray—anything from climate change to deforestation, from toxic acidification to loss of natural habitat—as a product of petro-modernity conveyed by/borne out of a half-century’s textual and artistic obsession with the road. I argue that roads and highways are more than just spaces where narratives of automobility, late-capitalism, and American identity play out: they are the infrastructures that allow for and thus shape those very same narratives. The road undergoes various conceptual evolutions that reflect

and inflect the history of American development during the late-twentieth century. Tracing the material and cultural progressions of roads and the texts they have inspired over those decades offers an alternative vision of how petroculture remaps geography, environment, and artistic expression. But more importantly, the evolution of the road narrative suggests an alternative future wherein literature and art can challenge petroculture's maps. Petroleum alternatives must first emanate from the imaginative energy of the mind before we can actualize material energy alternatives.

I focus on four distinct periods spanning the 1950s to the 2000s, each emblematic of different road relations. First, the 1950s and 1960s illustrate Americans' increasing dependence upon oil, not simply in growing petro-infrastructure that map suburbanization and oil capitalism but also in representations of the road in art and literature. Postwar oil exuberance promises unending opportunity, an individual mobility free of consumptive and imaginative restrictions—think Beatnik spontaneous prose, Ed Ruscha's parking lot photography, and Andy Warhol's pop-art. However, during these years subtle anxieties emerge, what I term "petro-anxiety," as the pursuit of transformative experience on the road repeatedly fails. These anxieties fully manifest during the second period beginning in the 1970s, culminating in the energy crises of 1973 and 1979. Americans attempt to reconcile scarcity in the seventies (the "catastrophe" or "collapse" inevitably paired with "exuberance") through nostalgia or by (re)structuring national security via containment-era industries, nationalisms, family stability, and gender ideologies (Buell, 70). Several archetypes emerge in response to scarcity: the outlaw driver, the cynical wayward teen, and the emasculated white patriarch. These figures attempt to work against petro-anxiety in the 1970s, but in doing so reveal tangible apprehensions about Americans' material dependencies and the failing American dream. Third, I examine alternative subjectivities and alternative

driving practices on the road in the early 1980s and 1990s that correlate with the growth of global neoliberalism and Peak Oil.¹⁰ Road narratives diversify during this period, allowing drivers an opportunity to investigate racial, gender, and sexual identity on the road, an endeavor previously limited to largely middle-class white men. These later narratives offer a more complex material and textual narrative of petroculture. I claim many alternative drivers discover that their experiences with modern forms of systemic oppression are rooted in the profusion of petro-modernity that paves over minorities in the name of oil progress. By reappropriating the road narrative, these texts unveil the force of petroculture within human interiority and begin to remap how we might imagine human agency beyond the limitations or determinations of petroleum. Fourth, I examine speculative post-oil futures, inspired by oil warfare in the Middle East, Tough Oil, and the acceleration of anthropogenic climate change.¹¹ This period presents perhaps the most complicated, lasting questions: what would our world look like without oil? How does the human change in a post-oil world? Can humanity *ever* be post-oil? Would it still *be* humanity then?

Writing the Road: from On the Road to The Road

All fossil fuels introduce a new global energy episteme, but oil specifically strikes a chord with the human spirit. It is viscous and potent, exponentially more powerful in its ability to deliver usable energy than wood, coal, or renewables, and infinitely more malleable.¹² Oil fueled

¹⁰ Peak Oil hypothesizes that increasing global oil consumption will push the rate of oil extraction to a maximum capacity, a “peak” wherein global oil reservoirs can no longer sustain consumer demand. Peak Oil is often framed as an ominous warning about global oil appetites and anxieties over dwindling material resources.

¹¹ Tough Oil is oil that is both difficult to extract and presents a “devastating scale of its externalities” (LeMenager, 3). These forms include deepwater drilling, fracking, and tar sands mining. It is sometimes viewed as the successor to Peak Oil, as it conveys the (literal) depths to which humans will go in order to sustain extractive industries.

¹² Renewable energy sources have the potential to contribute more power to the electrical grid than oil over time, but oil’s combustive power is currently not replicable with renewables.

technological innovation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reshaped national geographies, restructured the American family, and refined the modern corporate business model—first with Standard Oil, but later with automotive and petrochemical companies as well (think Ford, Monsanto, Dow Chemical, or Merck). Implementation of oil on the road through fuel, the automobile, and the highways themselves makes possible an era of driving and personal mobility that seems to counter feelings of modern disillusionment. Duffy notes that the motorcar does more than impact commerce or movement: it promises new physical sensations that attract the modern human to the machine (7). Duffy further notes that the oil-fueled speeds of modern life contributed to a “paradigm-shattering moment when it became clear that the whole world had at last been mapped and conquered, and that global space was finite” (19). Here, I contend that highway construction attempted to continue mapping and conquering geographical space, reaching out as oil does in tentacular fashion to the furthest ranges of national boundaries, while (re)structuring the mind. The car, gasoline, and the road—the triangle of oil capitalism through which I frame this project—utterly reorient modern life *and* the modern petro-consumer’s perception of life itself. And at the midcentury, oil’s energy possibilities forecast far into the future. Petroculture’s seemingly endless energies very quickly became vital to American culture at large.

My dissertation is bookended by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. These two texts convey differing extremes that come to symbolize the development of the road narrative over the course of the late-twentieth century. *On The Road* revels in speed, in resistance to suburban homogenization and the systemic codification of self-reliance. *The Road* is slow; the speculative nature of science-fiction allows the novel to deliberate the consequences of humanity’s unchecked appetites and meditate upon the material and affectual consequences of

oil and post-oil worlds. In the former, limitation is only a consequence of one's lack of imagination; in the latter, limitation challenges the novel's narratological boundaries and defines the setting—and thus defines humanity itself. How do we move between such extremes in such a short period of time—from the infinitely inspirational midcentury “exuberance” in *On The Road* to the bleak longing for and embodied memory of oil in *The Road*?

Roughly fifty years separate *On The Road* and *The Road*. Over those 50 years, Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden describe “oil’s signature” as a “cultural ubiquity and absence” (xvii). As Buell explains, oil is implemented throughout American life. More than petrochemicals or plastics, postwar highways are the material vessels that distribute the American oil mythos throughout the nation: that shape suburbanization, corporatize material accumulation, and shuttle ideology across vast geographic and philosophic distances. Primeau claims that one of the attractions of the road (and road narratives) is the opportunity for community with “fellow-travelers, authors, readers, and critics,” to share a “collective experience” (4). While community plays a role in postwar road narratives, the road’s spatial and cultural magnetism goes much deeper than that, altering both body and mind. LeMenager explains that “the petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one’s feet are incorporating practices” (104). In both examples—driving and the feeling of summer heat resonating from asphalt—the road is central to the formation of modern identity. Roads and highways are persistent and regular, universal but seemingly unimposing. To be “on the road” is routine, almost mundane, yet at the same time exhilarating and comforting.

A portion of this comfort stems from a long national history of road construction. Schaeffer discusses the “good-roads” movement of the early twentieth century. Local and

regional citizens interested in automobility dug out and maintained roads to increase commerce, initially to expedite agricultural products to central markets and later to attract travelers as automobile tourism swelled. Historic highways such as the Lincoln Highway and the Dixie Highway had roots in the good-roads movement (Schaeffer, 132). By the 1920s and 1930s, federal legislation approved a number of public works projects that constructed the nation's first asphalt state highways. These are the highways Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty travel in the late 1940s in *On The Road*, the same highways William Least Heat-Moon later describes as "blue highways".¹³ The initial iteration of U.S. highways were irregularly networked, as many new state highways were often paved directly over the already existing good-roads highways. Good-roads highways facilitated local and regional commerce: they did not reflect a national infrastructural vision, fueled by oil and transnational commerce. After World War II, state highways brimming with touring cars and commercial trucks peaked, culturally and infrastructurally. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955) portrays the independent, unique communities that thrive along highways during the immediate postwar-era but also conveys the increasing surveillance and regulation that accompanied new roads. Humbert Humbert's final action, to "disregard the rules of traffic," is the novel's recognition that the roads that facilitated Humbert's illicit lifestyle are and always were controlled spaces (306). In refusing to follow traffic laws, Humbert concedes his agency, which is exactly what he wants: to "surrendering" himself "lazily, like a patient, and deriving an eerie enjoyment from my [sic] limpness and the absolutely reliable support given... by the police and the ambulance people" (307). Humbert's

¹³ Congress passed highway legislation numerous times prior to World War II (as early as 1916), but road construction became a key commercial reform during the 1920s and then an economic generator during the New Deal 1930s. In later travel guidebooks, like the MOBIL GUIDE, these highways were colored blue, hence Least Heat-Moon's designation.

participation or non-participation in road culture opens access to various formations of the nation and to governmental bodies that use the road to recognize and harness outliers.

This highway palimpsest necessitated maps like the MOBIL GUIDE but also brought together a conglomeration of American politicians, industrialists, and futurists who claimed the nation needed a newer, more expedient interstate highway system. Successful examples already existed: Robert Moses' roads project in and around New York City or the German *Autobahn*—which many veterans had just seen and experienced during World War II (Caro, 921-922).¹⁴ The Federal Highways Act of 1957 enabled construction of the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System, not to replace America's older highways but rather to augment them. Caro notes that New York City residents and “some troops did not respond to this ringing trumpet call as they had to his [Moses'] trumpet calls of the past.” Traffic was an undeniable problem in the city (and throughout the nation) but road construction was also a significant disruption to daily life. The “Traffic Generation” recognized to some degree that “the more highways were built to alleviate congestion, the more automobiles would pour onto them and congest them and thus force the building of more highways—which would generate more traffic and become congested in their turn in an inexorably widening spiral” (Caro, 897). But these few quiet voices made little impact on interstate highway construction. Already established state highways did not furnish the suburban vision of postwar America, which rested on the separation between urban industry and commerce and the suburban nuclear family life. And mass transit or even consumptive restraint seemed superfluous, given the postwar oil surplus. Interstate highways seemed an obvious progression.

¹⁴ Sarah Laskow conjectures that Eisenhower's 1919 trek across the U.S. (a military venture) greatly contributed to his support of an efficient trans-national highway network (Laskow).

As sites of highway travel and ongoing highway construction, roads became increasingly prevalent both literally and conceptually throughout the nation. During this first period of postwar automobility (the 1950s and 1960s), roads and travel narratives are inextricably linked: as highways expand, they contribute to an imaginative American geography that solidifies oil mythologies of freedom, mobility, and transformative experience through literature, film, and music. In exuberant road narratives, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Jerry Lee Lewis' track "End of the Road" (1956), John Steinbeck's *Travel's With Charley* (1961), Walker Percy's *The Movie-Goer* (1961), even as late as Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), the road is a uniquely egalitarian American space, where one can pursue personal transcendence and explore national identity. Road narratives became trendy, championed within popular culture. The texts, "often manifest as escape, political protest, or social reform," were viewed as expressions of agency and freedom: there is a slight envy when reading a road novel, as if the text has realized something the reader also desperately wants (Primeau, 4). However, the same seemingly uninhibited mobile subjectivity that makes the "hero journey" possible also allows for the nuclear family's annual vacation or the efficient transportation of industrial agriculture. As we see with the MOBIL GUIDE, roads appear to be a network to anywhere America, when in reality they are always leading to specific renderings of the nation.

By the 1970s, many Americans faced a crude reality: oil, as material resource, was not infinite and material dependence came with very real consequences. Beginning with the OPEC oil embargo in 1973, the nation entered a period of economic recession. Throughout the decade, road narratives assume a sort of duality, either celebrating deviancy on the road or using the road to critique the failures of the American dream. For example, throughout the decade the road facilitated various masculine narratives that attempt to reclaim threatened American manhood

through driving. Primarily, these archetypes take shape in film and television: the outlaw trucker in *Breaker! Breaker!* (1977) or *Convoy* (1978), troubled but righteous law enforcement officers in *Bullitt* (1968) or *The French Connection* (1971), or deviant drivers who range from harmless troublemakers in *The Dukes of Hazard* (1979) and *The Cannonball Run* (1981) to unsettled anti-heroes in *Vanishing Point* (1971). These films portray the road as a space for acting out unmitigated individualism, a last bastion of freedom in a new oil world defined by limitation. The muscle car's popularity onscreen projects a very specific masculinity: real men were expert drivers liberated from national restraints. On the road of these road narratives, a man could evade not only restrictions to his autonomy but also the material constraints of oil scarcity. Other road films present bleak national trajectories that, like the road itself, seem inescapable. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Duel* (1971), and *Badlands* (1973) all exhibit skepticism about oil potentialities. The road is not simply an ideal escape, it is the only route left for desperate characters. In all three films, the road is confining, not freeing: the driver's mobility is predictable, the blacktop is inescapable, and death or incarceration is inevitable.

In *The Prize*, Yergin investigates the sociocultural and political ramifications of 1970s oil scarcity. OPEC controlled oil distribution throughout the decade, accounting for 65 percent of global oil production in 1973 and 62 percent in 1978 (Yergin, 647). The embargo, which targeted the U.S. specifically, cut off major oil flows. In response, the United States sought oil security by increasing domestic extraction in Alaska and international imports from Mexico and the North Sea (648-649).¹⁵ In the 1980s, the U.S. momentarily reclaimed oil and fiscal security, an economic upsurge accompanied by a cultural renaissance within identity politics and fear of global environmental disaster—developments that had a dramatic effect on road narratives

¹⁵ The Trans-Alaska Pipeline was completed in 1977.

throughout the 1990s. I argue the road opens to new drivers in the nineties, particularly African Americans and women. This is not to say African Americans and women did not drive prior to the 1990s; early road narratives by black writers, such as Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* (1945) or Sterling Brown's poem "Southern Road" (1932)—convey an entirely different experience, where travel is not triumphant and the destination is not restorative (Primeau, 7). "Southern Road" deliberates the forced labor of prison chain gangs in the South who dug out railways, cleared land, and new roads: "Swing dat hammer—hunh--/Steady, bo';/ Swing dat hammer—hunh--/Steady, bo';/Ain't no rush, bebbly,/Long ways to go" (Brown). The speaker notes his family has migrated north while he remains "Doubleshacked": "Gal's on Fifth Street" and "Son done gone" as well. For midcentury white writers, roads symbolized freedom; for Brown's speaker, the road realizes the persistence of racial injustice throughout the modern-era. "White man tells me—hunh—" the speaker says "Chain gang nevah—hunh-- / Let me go."

Similarly, Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952) deals with gender and sexual complexities that are utterly absent from the majority of midcentury stories. Carol and Therese, the novel's two female protagonists, fall in love despite containment-era sexual regulation that outwardly marginalized same-sex relationships. The couple take a road trip from New York City to Utah, a journey of sexual, matrimonial, and geographical liberation. Unbeknown to Carol and Therese, they are followed by a private investigator working for Carol's husband, Harge. The road, rather than emancipating, allows the investigator to easily follow and record Carol and Therese's movements and actions. Carol and Therese buy into the road mythos, that on the road they will be free of the city's confinements and, thus, imposed sociocultural identities. In reality, the road networks petro-modern limitations. "Southern Road" and *The Price of Salt* make clear

that the road is and always was surveilled, directive, and exclusive, accessible to a limited designation of citizen and laid upon marginalized citizens.

I observe an increasingly diverse new set of road voices in the 1990s, influenced by different experiences that resist midcentury exuberance and seventies road masculinization. Moreover, these voices shift road narratives from the obdurately white-washed midcentury formula to a more politically aware textuality. The threat of global environmental destabilization is central to this shift. My project claims environmental conflicts that emerge in the later eighties and nineties, including the depleting ozone layer, Peak Oil, and global warming, have specific resonance for the decade's alternative road renderings. It is vital to recognize that road narratives within this period begin to realize patterns of environmental disconnect. This realization accelerates petroanxieties concurrent with the road narrative's expansion beyond limited midcentury frameworks. By the late 1960s and the realization of the environmental movement, the road is already such a powerful American mythos that it resists progressive environmentalism—or rather, hides beneath more visual, immediately affective environmental disasters. LeMenager explains that Americans did not really consider the destructive capacities of oil until the late 1960s, specifically in response to the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill—the first nationally televised, widely documented American oil disaster. Nineties road films such as *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *True Romance* (1993) accomplish a similar shift in visuality, where the setting (the road) itself contributes to an underlying critique of petroculture. This is to say, as viewers witness characters' environmental anxieties, the road's presence onscreen becomes less a space of freedom and triumphant individualism and more a space of geographic and imaginative confinement inseparable from the ecological and subjective consequences those characters experience. Many nineties road narratives take to the highway

first as an exploration of identity or personal desire—the kind of self-exploration previously denied. More importantly, what many of these texts end up discovering is that oil itself, and therein the road, perpetuates systemic oppression within the petromodern-era. In other words, the petro-infrastructures that seem to perpetuate freedom as foundational to the American mythos are in all actuality responsible for evolving forms of discrimination and injustice. These texts forecast a dangerous future. American “addiction” to oil seems interminable, even as petro-consumers recognize the ecological consequences (the emissions, spills, and pollutants) of unmitigated use alongside problematic sociocultural hegemonies.

Yergin expresses some hope for global oil futures. He notes that fuel efficiency has become a focus within the automotive industry and even wonders what roles biofuel, electricity, or natural gas might play in reorienting global approaches to oil (773). He goes on to explain that, “greater efficiency in the use of oil and other energy sources is emerging as a major and common policy objective in countries around the world.” Yet he also admits that for the foreseeable future, “oil will be a central factor in world politics and the global economy, in the global calculus of power, and in how people live their lives.” Between 2003 and 2008, global oil prices skyrocketed (Yergin, 771). In turn, Peak Oil reached crisis, though Yergin explains that the fear of loss and material absence “are also part of a long tradition in the world.” American military presence in the Middle East increased exponentially over the same period; though disguised in anti-terrorist rhetorics, continuing American occupation has become widely acknowledged as complicit in complex proxy wars over crude assets. Finally, the transition from Peak Oil to Tough Oil suggests a firm commitment to oil futures (LeMenager, 3). Indeed, Tough Oil particularly confirms national and global oil dependencies: humanity is more than willing to endure environmental disasters such as *Deepwater Horizon* and decimate biomes through tar

sands mining, fracking, and off-shore drilling than to transition to renewable energy sources. This is to say nothing of anthropogenic changes in atmospheric carbon levels, responsible for climate destabilization on a global scale. Absolute disregard for energy alternatives problematizes notions of going “post-oil.” If anything, petro-modernity only continues to habituate petro-consumers, to leak into all facets of daily life.

By the 2000s, oil appears volatile on apocalyptic scales. Though many 2000s-era road narratives continue to make present critiques through contemporary settings, a large genre migration towards speculative fictions acknowledges the potential for future eco-apocalypse. Alternative realities/worlds encourage compelling imaginative projects. Further, science fiction texts often use alternative realities/worlds as commentaries on current geopolitical issues. Energy and resource wars have become a major plot device within science fiction as petro-anxiety intensifies. Most importantly, speculative fictions such as James Howard Kunstler’s *World Made By Hand* (2008), Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017), and the video game series *Fallout* intimate just how difficult thinking post-oil can be. LeMenager writes that “decoupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it may be the primary ecological narrative in the service of human species survival beyond the twenty-first century” (104). Even with this knowledge, each of the aforementioned texts grasps at a past drenched in easy oil and grapples with a present and future *still* reliant on what little petroleum still exists. In *American War*, climate change devastates the natural world. Ensuing resource scarcity incites a second American Civil War with disastrous humanitarian and ecological consequences. Even as the world burns, petro-infrastructure endures. Roads become valuable tactical spaces; at the same time, their continued use shows a persistent commitment to petro-modernity, even when that

modernity exists only in memory. Even imagining a post-oil world, a world “after oil” proves immensely difficult. Actualizing the post-oil in our own world seems nearly impossible.

Jesmyn Ward’s recent novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is one road narrative that attempts to deconstruct the future of petro-modernity on the road within a present (not speculative) setting. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward evaluates American race relations, the prison-industrial complex, and rural poverty, but specifically chooses to do so in a tale set on the road. Why set a contemporary critique of systemic oppression on the road? In doing so, she marks the road as the material infrastructure that aids and abets mass incarceration and thus the social control of African Americans, the poor, and other marginalized U.S. citizens. Ward’s novel declares roads, the bedrock of petro-modernity, contributors and facilitators of contemporary injustices that Americans struggle with daily. Though I understand the attraction to science fiction, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* shows we need not look to the future to see the disasters of speculative fiction; some of them are occurring at this very moment.

Roads trace a specific material history from the midcentury to the post-oil imagination. This history reveals incredible ambitions rooted in postwar oil exuberance and equally incredible tragedies in the environmental and humanitarian tolls. LeMenager explains, “we might parse the ecological aspirations of car culture from its ecological effects, including habitat loss, human death, and the racial segregation performed by suburbs and freeways” (81). And while it is unfair to attribute the bulk of anthropogenic climate change to midcentury consumers like Sal and Dean who are unaware of global warming or rising greenhouse-gas emissions, midcentury road narratives set a precedent for national perceptions of oil. The evolutions of the road narrative suggest a growing pattern of environmental awareness, but also present few off-road alternatives to our petroleum world. In tracing the road’s history, one thing is perfectly clear: starting in the

postwar era, the road becomes the central site of petro-modernity's material, cultural, and environmental conflicts. As the mythos grows, roads remap the American mind, just as they transport bodies, products, and ideologies. Though oil has a longer history within American culture and consciousness, the modern road narrative, an expression of suburban resistance, sensorial pursuit, sexual liberation, identity formation, and ever-accumulating environmental anxiety, is emblematic of Americans' struggles to parse out our most admirable aspirations from our most destructive appetites.

Chapters

My dissertation accounts for the evolutions of petroculture signified by the road and supplements critiques of petroculture with previous material examinations of oil and oil culture. Specifically, I redirect threads of environmental scholarship towards specific spaces and cultural productions to reveal the ways in which humans are shaped by oil narratives, rather than the ways humans shape those narratives. Further, I contribute new scholarship to the field of petroculture studies and environmental culture studies through theories of affect, race, gender, class, and ethnicity that are, at times, overshadowed in ecocritical scholarship. I hope to convey a heightened sense of environmental awareness, but an awareness that acknowledges social injustice and environmental anxiety as vitally connected, as more than merely concurrent phenomena. Petrocultures, more than Wilderness Studies, New Materialism, or Object Oriented Ontology, observes and justifies discourses in environmental justice that must be central to environmental scholarship in the future. In focusing specifically on the road as the material shape(r) of the petro-modern American, I argue we are able to observe new and different ways in which oil impacts modern subjectivity and how those "impacts" are woven into our bodily and

cultural engagements with our surrounding environment. My project ultimately claims environmental criticism must go “off-road” in both a material and affective sense: energy alternatives to oil are thus one element of what must be a larger reimagination of consumption and material resources.

Chapter One argues that midcentury Beatnik and Hippie subcultures, typically celebrated for their contributions to postwar counter-cultures, are ultimately undermined by their dependence on corporate oil. Specifically, I offer alternative readings of Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* and Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* that reveal the road as a confining space, rather than a liberating space. Counter to scholarly consensus, I read both texts as early manifestations of petro-anxiety, rather than admirable pursuits of personal identity—though *On The Road* bears a deeper level of complicity, slightly offset by Wolfe’s more critically self-aware narration in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Likewise, I claim the pursuit of transcendence or transformative experience on the road is one so deeply embedded in forms of midcentury oil exuberance, characters are unable to recognize the ways in which the road, automobility, and petroleum (re)shapes their interiority. These early texts set a precedent for later road narratives, one that frames new forms of American identity as only accessible on the road.

Chapter Two continues to explore petro-anxiety during the emergence of oil scarcity throughout the 1970s. I frame the decade through two specific cultural phenomena: first, attempts to reclaim threatened masculinity through dissident or lawless behavior on the road; and second, critiques of the “American dream” that concede the failures of petro-modernity. Scarcity utterly disrupts triumphant midcentury road narratives. Forms of American identity dependent on oil surplus become unrealistic, fantastical even, without geopolitical oil security. Seventies road narratives, particularly within cinema, work to reestablish containment-era security by omitting

oil scarcity in an effort to (re)structure containment in the seventies. I argue that *Smokey and the Bandit* and *American Graffiti* face drastic consequences in the forms of consumption they portray. Conversely, threads in literature and popular music present a counter-narrative: that oil scarcity cannot be ignored and, in fact, engenders a larger denunciation of American life. This chapter is interdisciplinary in its focus, examining music by Bruce Springsteen, outlaw drivers in *Smokey and the Bandit*, nostalgia in George Lucas' film *American Graffiti*, and collapse of white suburban patriarchy in Raymond Carver's short story "What Is It?"

As the road veers away from the classic midcentury road narrative, Chapter Three similarly veers away from white, heteronormative masculinities. This crucial turn in the project steers instead towards alternative road narratives and alternative drivers invested in nonnormative racial, gender, and sexual identities on the road.¹⁶ The chapter's key texts, William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*, Eddy Harris' *South of Haunted Dreams*, and Erika Lopez's *Flaming Iguanas*, all in their own ways resist national discriminatory histories that attempt to delimit and define identity and control access to the pleasures, challenges, and narrative possibilities of the road. In *Blue Highways*, Least Heat-Moon grapples with questions of America and American-ness. In *South of Haunted Dreams*, Harris takes "the southern road" to better understand a region historically and presently embedded in racist ideology. In Erika Lopez's *Flaming Iguanas*, the author's loosely fictionalized main character Tomato Rodriguez leaves the confines of New York City both to explore sexual desire and to smash the archetypal road narrative. Her text is paired with illustrations that construct a complex web of textualities as a way of complicating the road narrative and of expressing fractured neoliberal petro-identity.

¹⁶ By "alternative drivers," I mean drivers who rely on forms of alternative automobility: the van and the motorcycle.

Finally, Chapter Four focuses solely on Cormac McCarthy's 2004 novel *The Road*. In the vein of speculative fiction, McCarthy imagines a world decimated by extreme changes to climate. I argue for a materialist reading of the novel, rather than an allegorical or symbolic one, that recognizes the remnants of petroculture that continue to shape and reshape human interiority in perpetuity. The chapter examines the road as material surface, cannibalism as the climax of consumption-out-of-control, and the global effects of climate destabilization. *The Road* offers readers figures who embody two different futures: one who longs for petro-modernity's lost structure, and another who is as post-oil as he is post-human. Born amidst eco-apocalypse, the latter figure, a young boy, presents an alternative post-petro ethics. The boy's strangeness is the strangeness of thinking post-oil. This is the central conflict in *The Road* and, by proxy, my dissertation: how can we think post-oil? If *On The Road* begins the postwar road trip, then *The Road* ends it. It is the last road trip. Perhaps McCarthy's conclusion to the road narrative can resolve a central dilemma in transitioning out of petromodernity: to think post-oil, we must think off the road. To progress beyond the creature comforts of petroculture, we must inhabit strangeness.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE *ON THE ROAD*: MOBILITY AND PETROCULTURES DURING THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

“Yes! You and I, Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world. Ain’t nowhere else it can go—right?”
– Dean Moriarty; Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

Roots of the American Road Narrative

Since its publication in 1957, Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* has become the “benchmark” for twentieth-century road narratives, particularly due to the text’s influential style and cultural impact (Primeau, 7). Though some have criticized the novel for problematic portrayals of race and gender, scholars such as Ronald Primeau, Omar Schwartz, and Robert Holton celebrate the Beat counter-cultural aesthetic of the road as a space that provides characters opportunity outside normative culture.¹⁷ While the majority of scholarship actively explores the novel’s counter-cultural possibilities, using oil as a material framework exposes ways in which petroleum has been historically overlooked or ignored as a significant influence upon both the material and ecological shape of twentieth-century texts. Throughout the postwar era, particularly during the midcentury, petroleum in its various forms functions as a commodity that not only draws characters into forms of capitalistic consumption but makes those same subjects perpetuators of

¹⁷ Holton and Swartz claim the text has been “misunderstood” and should be valued for its anti-authoritarian stance towards non-inclusive national value systems (5). Dominic Ording, for example, challenges the novel’s non-conformity by outlining its “traditional rigid notions of masculinity” which work against any possible resistance to traditional literary forms (81).

the very culture they oppose. In *On The Road*, petroleum dictates mobility and human-environmental contact—see, for example, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty’s commitment to the road and automobile as conduits of transcendental opportunity. Over four long road trips, Sal and Dean never realize the romantic potentials they associate with the road. Rather, they contribute to a midcentury outlook that correlates the increasing energies of fossil fuels with promises of personal freedom—what Frederick Buell terms midcentury “exuberance” (Buell, 70) and Stephanie LeMenager identifies as the “aesthetics of petroleum” (LeMenager, 66). Not only are the aesthetic pleasures of petroleum unsustainable—as oil itself is volatile and non-renewable—but the seemingly limitless potentials for personal expression are in fact limited by the materiality of oil itself. Examining *On The Road* through the lens of petrocultures acknowledges a trajectory of unsustainability during the midcentury that encourages consumption as a necessary function of ideological pursuit—in this, the novel has value in foregrounding the larger ideological framework produced by petrocultures, even as the novel itself may not be fully conscious of this.

Additionally, tracing oil in *On The Road* reveals the problems of counter-cultural expression based within or dependent upon the systems actively being opposed—a legacy that extends beyond the bohemian culture of the Beats into later movements and texts, particularly the Merry Pranksters as seen in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Throughout many road novels, individual acts of consumption are determined by and part of a national consumerist attitude highly inflected by the exuberance of fossil fuels in the years after World War II (Buell, 81). In *On The Road*, the car is emblematic of Sal and Dean’s failures to resist midcentury efforts to fix identity via suburbanization, daily corporate routine, and the nuclear-family model—a national trajectory that is enabled via midcentury oil capitalism and later stimulated through

implementation of the domestic petro-chemical industry.¹⁸ Acid, in regards to the mind, functions similarly throughout *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Issues of racial and ecological exploitation or heteronormativity are accelerated by characters' absolute commitment to the car and the road—a knowing refusal to function off the road—and therein, outside of the industries that build, maintain, and grow those infrastructures. Imre Szeman asks contemporary readers to question culturally inscribed notions of freedom: “Are we able as a society to . . . re-map some fundamental ideas of freedom?... It isn't that we become less free; it's that maybe freedom isn't connected to driving a car with the wind in your hair.”¹⁹ In other words, are we able to remap not just the geographic directionality of, say, the MOBIL GUIDE, but human interiority that associates feelings of freedom and mobility with the road? Here, Szeman gestures to the central theme of *On The Road* and the heart of petroculture in America: the road—and with that the cars, humans, and material misuse oil culture perpetuates. Despite petroleum's increasing global presence over the last century, energy culture itself is so ubiquitous it is easily overlooked; not only does oil shape culture and writers, but it composes a vast network of influence throughout texts themselves (Barret and Worden, xviii). If consumption of resources can be separated from the material itself, as is the case with Sal and Dean, it is far easier to overlook one's contributions to industries and economic systems that encourage systemic environmental misuse.

Reading unsustainability in *On The Road* contributes to a small but growing conversation centered on petroleum-related socio-cultural productions intended to greatly expand the ways in

¹⁸ Shaffer notes the automobile promised to “liberate” travelers from “rigid railroad schedules and final destinations, as well as artificial, urban social constraints,” which she claims redefines the “promises and possibilities of liberal individualism” (Shaffer, 168). Kris Lackey similarly notes, “early road writers ... emphasized [car travel's] ability to afford intimacy with nature and obey the whims and moods of the traveler” (Lackey, 70). However, the connection between CO2 emissions—largely from driving—and global climate change reveals that cars and the rhetoric of freedom attached to driving are environmentally damaging.

¹⁹ Szeman interview with Carmen Rojas: <http://www.woablog.com/2014/09/at-the-forefront-of-a-new-field-of-study/>

which scholars and activists view petroleum, petro-industries, and petro-infrastructures. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden's collection *Oil Culture* compiles humanities scholarship on petrocultures, contributing to works by Stephanie LeMenager, Amitav Ghosh, and Szeman in an effort to reassess the critical scope of environmental criticism pertaining to petroleum and sustainability. In her most recent book, *Living Oil*, LeMenager describes petroculture as "objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other life, and to things" (6). A relatively new term, petroculture has garnered critical attention because it places the acceleration of late capitalism firmly alongside the trajectory of the petroleum industry; as LeMenager makes clear, the ways in which petro-industries mediate human and environmental contact is central to petrocultural critique. Petrocultures, then, represent a particularly fruitful framework for examining the intersections of cultural expression, environmental critique, and commodification in *On The Road*, acknowledging that material resources *and* representations of resources impact ecological sustainability and environmental contact. Because our present must confront petroleum's environmental impact—through oil crises ranging from Deepwater Horizon and Keystone XL to the Dakota Access Pipeline—it is important to reevaluate the material and cultural history of art in order to better understand depictions of the human and non-human.

Sal and Dean posit the illimitable possibilities of personal freedom on the highway without confronting the unsustainability of their fossil fuel-based consumption. Both characters' dependence upon and ignorance of the petro-industries they support subvert their resistance to cultural normativity. While a critique of *On The Road* after the trials of peak oil and Tough Oil retroactively reveals petroleum as a narrative undermining Sal and Dean's counter-cultural projects, exploring these issues recognizes the inevitability of fossil fuel crises during the late-

twentieth century.²⁰ Further, this framework exposes moments throughout the novel wherein the narrative presciently—if perhaps unconsciously—comments on the futurity of fossil fuel crises. In the first half of this chapter, I critique *On The Road*, specifically Sal and Dean’s relationship to cars and roads, speed and bliss, and a phenomenon I call petro-anxiety, paying particular attention to the ways petro-infrastructure direct and dictate human and environmental contact. The effects of what I deem “petro-affect,” or the ways in which petroleum shapes and reshapes human interiority, lead to anticipatory critiques wherein the novel exceeds the bounds of its narrative, unconsciously gesturing towards future environmental misuse. Two instances—Old Bull Lee’s speech in New Orleans and the travelers’ inability to achieve the transcendental possibilities tied to the road—are particularly evident of the text’s prescient critique of consumption throughout late capitalism.²¹ The second half of the chapter will address the legacy of *On The Road*, with particular attention to Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Through Wolfe’s work, we see an extension of the transformative failures within *On The Road*, as midcentury oil capitalism expands via petrochemistry into early phases of petro-modernity. 1960s containment countercultures look to build upon and exceed bohemian pursuits popularized by Kerouac, despite the same commitments to sensory pleasures that are made possible by the power inherent in oil. While Ken Kesey, the central character of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, expounds a commitment to communal, collective experience and free exploration of the mind, these ventures are always and already grounded within the growing networks of petro-modernity.

²⁰ ‘Tough Oil’ is the term critics use to describe our post- peak oil moment, wherein oil reserves do still exist but the tactics used to extract those resources have become difficult, exploratory, and often disastrous. These methods include tar sands oil, deepwater drilling, and fracking.

²¹ This is to say, while on one hand—particularly through Sal and Dean—the novel seems ignorant of its complicity with an unsustainable future, in other ways the narrative voice acknowledges the potentiality of environmental misuse.

Ultimately, I seek to understand *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* not simply as texts that take place on America's burgeoning highways, but texts dependent in both form and content upon that space.²² Rather than transcendence, the pursuit of transformative experience merely reincorporates their actions into a system of extraction, consumption, and waste. *On The Road* then becomes a road novel that exposes the triumphant narrative of its central characters as merely one more narrative bounded by midcentury oil capitalism. Further, it sets an ironic standard for countercultural pursuits in the future that are inevitably mired in the same forms of consumption that undermine Sal and Dean. Though Wolfe is subtly more critical of his subjects in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Kesey and the Merry Pranksters fall prey to the same individual desires and consumptive patterns that forecast the consequences of evolving petro-modernity (the focus of Chapter Two).

Roads and Cars

The long, continuous road is a cultural paradigm that Sal subscribes to even before his first journey west.²³ His initial plan—to follow one road, Route 6, from New York to Ely, Nevada—reveals Sal's romantic commitment to the road as more than material space. He views the road as a space imbued with transformative, even transcendental potential. Though Sal's experiences in *On The Road* help build the American road mythos, his own romance is rooted in frontier stories, maps, and "books about the pioneers" wherein he savors "names like Platte and

²² Primeau defines "American road narratives" as "fiction and nonfiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away" (1). While these narratives "draw upon a rich genre memory of literary conventions extending as far back as ancient travel literature, religious pilgrimages, and mythic quests," the road narrative as defined by Primeau begins with automobile. Further, Primeau defines four categories of road narratives: travel literature, the hero journey, picaresque tales, and the epic tradition (5-7).

²³ Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road," F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Cruise of the Rolling Junk*, or early road novels by Theodore Dreiser, such as *A Hoosier Holiday*, helped to establish the road as transformative.

Cimarron” (10). Fancying himself a new-age pioneer, Sal dreams Route 6—that “one long red line”—will guide him across the entire continent. “I’ll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely,” he says, envisioning a certain kind of mobility that is transformative but uncomplicated—painstakingly planned but easily consumed. Perhaps most importantly, Sal intends to hitchhike the entire way; he expects American drivers will openly and willingly facilitate his romantic journey.²⁴ Although Route 6 does not occupy the same cultural prestige as Route 66, there are reasons for Sal’s commitment to the highway. In 1947, Route 6 was the longest highway in the country, stretching 3,652 miles from Provincetown, Massachusetts to Long Beach, California.²⁵ Further, Route 6 was the first fully paved transcontinental highway.²⁶ Sal imagines a grand journey without deviation from his intended route; in this same way, he expects little deviation from what he envisions America to be.

Before he realizes what being “on the road” means experientially, Sal is already subject to the ways in which petrocultures mediate his mobility. Though he spends much of this first journey hitchhiking, he is dependent upon petroleum infrastructures to facilitate his travel: the cars he hitches with all run on gasoline, the buses he utilizes when he cannot find a ride are dependent on gasoline, and the most convenient place to find willing drivers is the gas station where travelers congregate (14). Perhaps the best image of Sal’s emergent petroleum dependence is the asphalt road itself: a petroleum product used to efficiently transport petro-

²⁴ Sal’s first journey, from New York to San Francisco, is remarkable for its egalitarian catalogue of travelers: between New York and Denver, he hitches twenty-two rides with thirty people—drivers and other hitchhikers included. This is not counting the bus trips, but only the hitchhiking. Also, only about twenty-five people are mentioned, but Paradise catches five cars out of New York City on his first day, so I am taking liberty here assuming there was only one driver per vehicle; though this may not be the case, it is not specified in the text.

²⁵ Route 6 has since changed routes and is no longer the longest highway in country.

²⁶ Route 6 was not fully paved until 1952; however, even in 1947 most of the road east of Denver was paved. Both Route 6 and Route 66 were created nearly simultaneously by the Joint Board of Interstate Highways; legislation passed in 1925 (Frequently Asked Questions).

consumers.²⁷ Marquerite Shaffer explains the complex local, regional, and federal maneuverings that went into building a national highway system, starting with the Good Roads movement in the first and second decades of the twentieth-century. This loose lobby—which brought together farmers, merchants, and other local travelers in an effort to increase local commerce while preserving regional histories (Shaffer, 141-142)—was quickly overwhelmed by automobile travelers intent on expanding and modernizing road networks to allow for easier maintenance and transcontinental travel (156).²⁸ *On The Road*'s position historically chronicles a period of immense change in American automobility. Precursor to the Eisenhower Interstate System, this first iteration of the American highway system connects coasts and cities in such a way as to commit the US to a fossil-fuel economy on a long temporal scale. Ultimately, more efficient roads require pavement, larger infrastructures, and increased oil consumption. This vision also requires a certain belief; Sal has immeasurable faith in increased mobility as a solution to personal dissatisfaction. He begins the novel stationary, sick, and struggling with divorce (1). For Sal, the answer to these problems lies in movement epitomized by the speed and potential of the road.

The road itself occupies a duality throughout the novel. Sal perceives the road as imbued with transformative power; yet at the same time the surface is a mixture of oil and repurposed earth. The play between material surface and transcendental pursuit is emblematic of the novel's fundamental yet largely overlooked conflict: submission to industrial culture in the pursuit of increased personal freedoms. Sal's voice is the standard by which experiences on the road are measured. Though Dean occupies much of the dialogue and becomes the more memorable

²⁷ Asphalt is a mixture of gravel, rock, and dirt bound by bitumen, a petroleum derivative.

²⁸ The development of national road networks, Shaffer argues, came in response to an emergent nationalism that promoted free travel (symbolized first by the train, but later perfected with the car) and was attained through leisure—specifically what she terms “national tourism” (3).

figure, it is ultimately Sal's interpretive vision that determines what composes "America"; further, these moments convey his deepest environmental awareness, even if that awareness is based upon preconceived notions of spaces he has never experienced. The Mississippi River, for instance, is the slow-moving, expansive landmark Sal imagines it to be: "And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smells like the raw body of America itself" (13). Though Sal has had no previous contact with his "beloved Mississippi River," he imagines national community based on environmental commons including rivers, mountains, and sweeping western spaces.

Sal's voice is just as easily swayed to disappointment when reality does not match his romanticism. When he reaches Council Bluffs, Iowa anticipating a gateway to the West, he instead finds the beginnings of postwar suburbia: "We arrived at Council Bluffs at dawn; I looked out. All winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course, now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind or another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn" (17). The "cute" cottages are uninteresting and remind Sal of the commodity culture he is trying to escape. Unlike the Mississippi River, a space that refuses singular characterizations, suburbia greets Sal with a "dismal gray" future he does not like. He is similarly disappointed with Wild West Week in Cheyenne. Sal is initially excited: "Big crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire, bustled and whooped on the wooden sidewalks of old Cheyenne" (28). The festival seems to support some of his ideas about the West, complete with "oilmen and ranchers," people spilling out of the saloon drunk on whiskey, "Indian chiefs wandering around in big headdresses and really solemn among the flushed drunken faces" (32-33). Yet something about it seems disingenuous, artificial. "I was amazed,"

says Sal, “and at the same time I felt it was a little ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (28). Though he senses a tension, he does not realize that his image of the West does not reflect the reality of the place. He asks a young girl if she would like a “nice walk through the prairie flowers” (33). “There ain’t no flowers there,” the girl responds. The sagebrush grasslands in Wyoming are not the lush prairie garden of his imagination.

Tim Hunt explains that Kerouac’s own emotional/artistic development led him toward Sal’s stance: stunted in a “factualist” approach to his manuscript, he turned to a “metaphysical or romantic” style, reflected in Sal’s optimistic vision (89). This offers Sal—and Kerouac as writer—new ways to imagine the American continent: “[Dean] and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there” (138). The pearl seems tangible at moments, something Sal feels he and Dean have singular access to, but it never fully materializes. The road cannot deliver the promises of personal freedom and transformation from which Sal’s “metaphysical or romantic” voice draws its personality. “Gad, I was sick and tired of life,” Sal laments at the end of his first trip, sick of life but also by this point sick of the road *itself* (106). His vision generates hopeful prospects but equally exposes moments wherein that romanticism collapses.

Sal vacillates between moments of adulation and disappointment but routinely returns to his optimistic voice. This voice is the voice of midcentury oil: endlessly optimistic, but also long-winded, exuberant, hyperbolic, and self-mesmerizing. Sal’s internal conflicts manifest as attempts to rationalize/romanticize actual experiences when faced with the swelling material networks of midcentury oil capitalism. To understand the road as something more than an economic artery obscures the materiality of the space, glossing over the asphalt, gas stations, and

roadside commerce that keep drivers on the road. Both he and Dean attempt to conceptualize the road to be anything they want it to be: “What’s your road, man?—holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, anyroad. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow” (251). The “anyroad” always trends towards individual opportunity; it is never an apparatus for material transportation or commerce and industry. While hitchhiking from Davenport, Iowa to Des Moines, Sal rides with two truck drivers. He describes them as prolific drivers: the first, for instance, is a “great big tough truckdriver with popping eyes and a hoarse raspy voice who just slammed and kicked at everything and got his rig under way and paid hardly any attention to me” (14). Sal perceives an “outlaw”: the trucker is a man who yells, tells funny stories, and drives too fast because “them goddam cops can’t put no flies on *my* ass!” (14). The trucker’s “outlaw” stance belies/mystifies the utterly lawful, legislated status of oil, which by midcentury has long been bending law, domestic economy, and foreign policy to its will and agenda. Odder still: Sal never once asks what the drivers are transporting. In order for Sal’s truck drivers to exist, he must overlook their labor. In *Living Oil*, Stephanie LeMenager writes, “any scenic passage from *On The Road* reveals a similarly mediated approach—which does not diminish the book’s beauty but rather signals the divorce, even for many working-class kids, of nature from labor, from concrete knowledge of partnership with the nonhuman” (89). While not a scenic description, Sal’s description of prolific drivers conveys his disconnect from the labor and from the function of the roadway through that landscape. He is unable to make the jump from what he believes a truck driver *ought* to be to what a truck driver *actually* is: a laborer who transports material goods.²⁹ Further, a truck driver works within the same networks of travel that Sal associates with metaphysical potential. Here, we see Sal dependent upon petroleum via roads and

²⁹ Almost as a by-product, he does not consider the environmental ramifications of the truck’s fuel consumption, the goods being transported, or the waste from those products.

rides but also dependent upon industry to generate the type of commerce that will facilitate traffic, i.e. travelers who will offer up a ride. Hitchhiking is Sal's way of reproducing the outlaw image he projects on the trucker, an image that is always and already reincorporated into systems of capital and consumption. In this moment, Sal's (romantic) "America" clashes with (the actuality of) the United States. In as much as *On The Road* contributes to the growing mythos of the American road, Sal himself is invested in the mythos as well.

Experiences on the road are increasingly representative of limitation rather than possibility, particularly as the economy of the text reveals characters' reliance/dependence on oil. Even "outlaws"—the hitchhiker or trucker, personages of resistance to fixed identity—are reincorporated and systematized so as to tactically (re)order the non-normative. Hitchhiking is routinely a symbol of alternative mobility. The highway system seems an egalitarian opportunity for this brand of counter-cultural performance. For Sal, however, hitchhiking generates a different catalog of needs. A smart hitchhiker rarely passes up an opportunity to catch a ride. "Need" becomes validation for use wherein one's consumption of natural resources is justifiable despite unsustainable or environmentally damaging practices. This problem is a central conflict throughout Sal's first trip west. His "need" to fulfill the romantic vision he constructs around the road commits his movement to hitchhiking; it simultaneously prevents him from viewing other forms of mobility, such as pedestrianism, and therein other methods of identity formation.³⁰ In comparison to railroading, automobility seemed at first to be a highly individuated form of mobility. But it's clear that roadways channelize even this "freedom." Any form of participation within the culture of the road (such as using the roads or buying gasoline) perpetuates petro-infrastructures that shepherd and define mobility. Christopher Wells, for example, identifies

³⁰ Pedestrianism refers to a concept LeMenager discusses in *Living Oil*, which I will address in more detail at the end of the chapter.

taxes hidden in the cost of gasoline since the first surge of automobile purchasing in the 1910s and 1920s. These taxes provided revenue for highway building projects thirty years before Sal set out on the road. Wells writes, “unlike goods with itemized sales tax, gasoline *appeared* to be tax free, even if buyers and sellers both typically knew this was not the case” (Wells, 72).³¹ Using highways, which requires a car and gasoline, consolidates a state formation wedded to oil to accommodate more drivers and therefore more consumers—the beginnings of petro-modernity. Again, because roads exist, the “need” to travel those roads, to participate in that culture, obscures the consequences of use.³² While Sal is able to imagine a form of “outlaw” dissidence via hitchhiking or speed, it means having to overlook the fact that he unknowingly supports the systems he rebels against. Even the maps that first spawn Sal’s romantic vision of the road have been co-opted by petroculture, the same travelguides referenced in the introduction. Finally, it is the car and speed—both made possible through the power inherent within oil—that perpetuate his role as consumer and, ultimately, commit the novel singularly to the road.

Speed and Bliss

On The Road is very much a novel of increasing speed, both in the power of the text’s machines and the proliferation of asphalt roads. The first roads Sal imagines traveling—Route 6, Route 66, or the Lincoln Highway—were initially maintained at the local level and then

³¹ These same taxes still account for a vast majority of gasoline costs, nearly a century later. When states tried to reappropriate gas taxes for projects outside of highway-building, federal intervention successfully “earmark[ed] gas taxes for [only] highway expenditures” (Well, 72). Wells identifies an important aspect of developing petroculture that Shaffer and other critics overlook: the already deep ties between petro-industries and developing road systems.

³² Here again, we can note alongside Wells that participating in the culture of the road means one it also perpetuating those structures, committing oneself and further generations to those same infrastructures. As cultural mobility becomes more and more dependent upon highways and interstates, fueled by gasoline, the more difficult it is to imagine a network of movement outside of those industries.

expanded and monitored via federal supervision on a national level. The use of asphalt as a primary road-surface (beginning in the late 1920s and 1930s) fundamentally altered the type of mobility available to travelers. Asphalt made roads accessible to more drivers (new experiences spread transnationally), allowed for higher travel speeds, and was even a quieter surface than dirt roads. While earlier novelists such as Theodore Dreiser and even F. Scott Fitzgerald chronicle automobile travel over graded dirt roads during the Good Roads era, *On The Road* revels in the speed of asphalt. Elisheva Blas notes, “in the early 1900’s, the Office of Road Inquiry estimated that only 12% of roads in the United States were paved”; however, by the late 1940s, closer to half of the country’s roads were paved, though Blas describes the roads as “narrow and unsafe” (127-128). By the time of *On The Road*’s road trips, Sal and Dean had to suffer very few older highways. Likewise, speed induces physical pleasure and alters visual/cognitive perception. As Enda Duffy explains, drivers are able to explore “the nuances of emotion, sensory heightening, and psychic awareness engendered by the interaction between new machine and human subject” (113). Sensory experience amplifies as speeds increase. In the “nub” of Nebraska, Sal observes a “humpy” road, “with soft shoulders and a ditch on both sides about four feet deep, so that the truck bounced and teetered from one side of the road to the other” (25). Two Minnesota natives gun “up the truck to seventy,” and Sal admires their prowess as drivers: “They were tremendous drivers. How that truck disposed of the Nebraska nub.” The speed he finds so invigorating is only made possible by the gasoline-powered truck compelled forward on asphalt surfaces. Sal’s speed contributes to freedom myths heightened by the acceleration of sensory pleasures, but these pleasures are made possible through technological developments in petro-infrastructures that are monitored, maintained, and perpetuated through governmental bodies—not the individual’s spirit.

LeMenager notes “bliss” in *On The Road* “inheres in primarily kinesthetic and visual sensation that *seems* to be divorced from resource consumption” (88). Feelings of elation veil material resource-intensivity. Sal and Dean focus on sensory experience or extreme emotions which dissociate them from use: adrenaline-fueled euphoria masks consumption. Speed bliss excites Dean and calms Sal, connecting with drivers and passengers on physiological, emotional, and even ideological registers. In Denver, Dean borrows a car from the Travel Bureau: a ’47 Cadillac limousine.³³ The Cadillac is fast in ways no other vehicle in the novel can match. “Dean was jumping up and down with excitement to see it,” overcome with the speed possibilities (225). It excites his senses, drives him into “such obvious frenzy everybody could guess his madness” (226). The minute they leave Denver, Dean is already pushing the car to its limit: “Not two miles out of Denver the speedometer broke because Dean was pushing well over 110 miles per hour” (226). Sal is unalarmed by Dean’s speeding frenzy; in fact, he finds it comforting: “The faster we left Denver the better I felt, and we were doing it *fast*” (227). “I wasn’t frightened at all that night,” Sal explains, “it was perfectly legitimate to go 110 and talk and have all the Nebraska towns... unroll with dreamlike rapidity” (231). Quieter asphalt roads generate discourse, even lull the passenger to sleep. When awake, speed alters Sal’s vision—both physical eyesight and his romantic vision. Moving east this trip, the Cadillac is traveling the same highways Sal used while hitchhiking during his first journey.³⁴ Rather than indulging in booming descriptions of Rocky Mountain vistas or rolling Midwestern hills, however, Sal is more focused this time on Dean passing “cars by the half-dozen... [leaving] them behind in a cloud of dust”

³³ The Travel Bureau allowed travelers to find rides—sort of an early carpool—but also allowed drivers to drive vehicles to different parts of the country: “The travel bureau is where you go for share-the-gas rides, legal in the West” (162). The ’47 Cadillac was purchased in Mexico and transported to Denver. The owner, who lived in Chicago, needed someone to drive the car from Colorado to Illinois.

³⁴ This third trip, going east, takes Sal over the same landscapes and highways he traveled two years earlier, hitchhiking to California. “I had been over this Nebraska road,” Sal tells Dean (232).

(234). He comments that it is rare to “find a long Nebraskan straightaway in Iowa,” implying differences in landscape, but only because Dean is able to drive 110 miles per hour on these stretches of road. “I saw flashing by outside several scenes that I remembered from 1947,” Sal but everything seems more frenetic, “that old road of the past unreeling dizzily” as if “everything [had] gone mad” (235). Speed changes his contact with the space and transforms the previously relatable landscapes into “mad” extraordinary blurs (Duffy, 175). “Blur,” which Duffy explains as “the effective erasure of the visible,” becomes “the dominant trope for representing the sensation of what was seen at speed,” the only way to convey the experience of speed visually or textually (ibid).

Blur, like speed, can be overwhelming. Speed stimulates sensory experience but does so unsustainably. Not only are the resources that provide speed-possibilities limited, but the pursuit of always-increasing elation through speed leaves both Sal and Dean unsatisfied. Where movement counters Sal’s immobility, speed offers Dean an escape from family life and normative obligations. Sal begins the novel in stasis, but Dean emblemizes the novel’s speed from the very first pages (Holton, 20). He is unendingly energetic, unashamed, and unaware. Sal is consistently drawn to his charisma and daring, as he sees Dean as a living manifestation of the faith he places in transformative potential on the road. He describes Dean as a “burning shuddering Angel ... with enormous speed” (259), a soul “wrapped up in a fast car” (232). With shades of Milton’s Lucifer, Dean epitomizes the kind of mobility Sal wishes for himself. For Dean, the road is continuously forward-moving. Where Sal resists—“Maybe we ought to go back, though?” (292)—Dean is unstoppable—“No, never-never! Let’s go on,” he replies (292). Where Sal is hesitant, Dean is insistent and unfaltering. This obsession shrouds any material relationship to space, consumption, or the industries the pair supports because it places

individual importance above that of the environment, or any of their surroundings. Dean's language furthers his emphatic pursuit. His refrain "Yes! Yes! Yes!" is quick and repetitive, unknowingly the talk of oil edging to orgasm. W. T. Lhamon describes Dean's speech as emblematic of mid-century avant-garde ideals, or "consciousness exceeding its carrying capacity just at the moment the earth was exceeding its own" (152). Through speed pleasure, Dean commits to intense feeling and equally intense expression (Duffy, 8).³⁵ Speed becomes Dean's means of exceeding consciousness, of attempting to reach beyond the limitations that Lhamon describes. His quest for transformative consciousness—the pursuit of "kicks"—is encapsulated in his search for "IT:" "Man, this will finally take us to IT!... Just wait and see. Hoo! Whee!" (265). Oil is the lubricant and climax ("this" and "IT"). "This" makes possible the explosive speed pleasures that drive Dean to ecstasy while "IT" embodies the peak; oil is both Dean's material beginning and his carnal destination. Oil is hard enough to engender the journey, but just vague and abstract enough to merge with it in its exuberance.

The insatiable midcentury appetite Dean comes to characterize alters communication, intellect, sexuality, finance, and environment on the road. Likewise, it strips away romantic veneer and economizes mythic archetypes. In order to sustain their speed and keep the car moving, Sal and Dean start gathering hitchhikers but only if they pony up for fuel. After a speeding ticket, they "have to pick up hitchhikers and bum quarters off them for gas" (137). The hitchhiker is no longer the "outlaw," celebrated and spiritualized. Rather, the mythos is materialized, now an economic obligation Sal and Dean view as a burden that infringes upon their own individual pursuits. During Sal's time hitchhiking, he never mentions being asked to provide gas money—now, however, though his passengers are also hitchhikers, the exchange of

³⁵ Duffy explains speed pleasure as "personal effort and intensity experienced on one's own body" (8).

money further engages said characters within the workings of oil capitalism. They pick up a “young kid” who claims his aunt owns a grocery store in Dunn, North Carolina. Dean’s manic invitation—“When we get there can you bum a buck off her? Right! Fine! Let’s go!”—sours when they realize the story is not true: “It was a big hoax; once upon a time. . . . [H]e had seen the grocery store in Dunn and it was the first story that popped into his disordered, feverish mind” (138). Sal and Dean are sympathetic, but they won’t let him ride along without gas money: “We bought him a hot dog, but Dean said we couldn’t take him along because we needed room to sleep and room for hitchhikers who could buy a little gas” (138).³⁶ Their decisions are couched in a makeshift hierarchical system determined by their need for gasoline. In spite of their authenticity, they sacrifice their values in order to continue consuming.

Petroanxiety

Dean’s relationship to the road—and therein petroculture—is complicated by the fact that he, more than any character in the novel, is bound to oil commerce. Dan was raised a car thief, learned mechanics as a teenager, and is the most skilled driver in the novel: “The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car at forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race amongst the fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space” (6). To support his wife and baby (momentarily), Dean works at a full-service station “as a mold man, curing recapped tires and later hauling big hunnerd-fifty-pound tires” (186). But he experiences his greatest pleasures on the road and is unsatisfied with a stationary life—Ann Charters describes him as “the loner... given epic proportions” so he might live out “the sensual ecstatic joy of the road” (290). Sal is envious of his history and energy. To

³⁶ Paradise doesn’t recall a ride he received earlier in the novel from a businessman riding into Denver. “I used to hitchhike myself,” says the businessman, “that’s why I always pick up a fellow.” “I would too if I had a car,” Paradise responds. When he does eventually pick up hitchhikers, however, Sal does not duplicate the businessman’s generosity (138).

him, Dean seems to have already transcended. Further, he seems unincorporatized: whether through criminal activity or labor for independently owned service stations, he always appears to be in control of his own existence. At any moment, Dean is ready to leave behind his obligations and pursue his “kicks.” Perhaps this is why he is so invested in the pursuit of “IT”: for Dean, the power of material has always seemed equivocally self-empowering. Even in moments where Sal questions life on the road, Dean’s faith in the potentiality of oil is unshakeable.

Yet, Dean instigates the novel’s last three road trips, suggesting that in spite of Sal’s perception Dean is in fact still searching for that transformative plane. Dean’s physical and mental states become reflections of his material dependencies. After Sal’s first trip west, we see the emergence of what I call petroanxiety. Petroanxiety is the anxious worry over petroleum (gasoline or oil, primarily) that mediates material, environmental, and anthropological contact. Conceptually, petro-anxiety manifests in the sudden overabundance of material but also in moments of scarcity.³⁷ Midcentury American consumption is made possible by a period of what Frederick Buell terms oil “exuberance”: an abundance of oil in the years after World War II that allowed Americans to envisage the material resource as unending, endlessly available for consumption (Buell, 81). However, as Buell makes clear, exuberance is always offset by catastrophe, “a possible collapse” that exists as an underlying apprehension that accompanies lack (such as the worry about a gas tank reaching “empty”). Petroanxiety, in the form of both

³⁷ Both Fredrick Buell and LeMenager note that the beginnings of petroanxiety stem from an early fear of environmental disaster; Buell points to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which helped reveal the dangers of the emergent petrochemical industry, while LeMenager notes the importance of the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, a major event in the emergence of the burgeoning Environmentalism movement. However, anxieties about oil as commodity emerged on a national level for consumers in the 1970s, after major oil crises raised the cost of oil significantly, adding what Buell notes is “economic chaos to environmental meltdown” (Buell, 82). Oddly enough, the Middle Eastern oil embargo that caused oil shortages during the 1970s, a response to American involvement in the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Egypt-Syria, was only made possible through the petrocultures which allowed American empire to influence politics globally; in other words, without the oil from Tar Creek, Texas, and Louisiana, Americans would not have developed the energy or energy dependencies to influence culture, social politics, or energopolitics overseas.

abundance and lack, defines the road experience. For Sal and Dean, this anxiety manifests primarily in their need for fuel—both the physical material and the speed pleasures that fuel their journeys. For Dean, specifically, dependency begins to border on addiction. “Kicks” parrot the user’s craving for a fix, while the body and mind expose the physical and mental consequences of being hooked on oil: Dean’s bandaged thumb, “black as coal” as if it absorbed the oil and exhaust of their journey (244), or his bouts of madness (259). His wounds already dressed in fossil-fuels, Dean believes consuming *more* will lead to “IT!”; at the same time, he is constantly worried he does not have enough.³⁸ “Think if you and I had a car like this what we could do,” says Dean, “Yes! You and I, Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world” (231). This machine, the finest car they drive in the novel, could be the key to reaching transformative potential. Except the car is not Dean’s: he is merely transporting it across the country for a very nominal fee. Dean has to drop the car off in Chicago and never drives a car equal to the Cadillac again. He never achieves that degree of mobility again. He is never able to “dig” (or drill) enough for material to match his aspirations. Dean’s struggle as a consumer, his recklessness as a driver, is the realization of the human as “volatile *material*”—if only for the reader (Lemenager, 92). Despite his many failures, Dean somehow seems to avoid that “coming-to-knowledge” (92). His own petroanxiety plots a dangerous trajectory: it preludes scarcity (collapse) in the 1970s, an anxiety realized in the 1990s in global environmental disasters and speculated as future catastrophe.

³⁸ While Swartz deeply opposes the idea that a destination holds any real meaning for Sal and Dean—“Destinations are not important. Rather, the road represents an odyssey” (66)—each trip begins and ends with a goal. Dean is consumed by “a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road” (232). Certainly the “getting there” becomes a focus but Sal and Dean are always going *somewhere*. They never initiate a trip without a prospective goal. Both Shaffer and Lackey claim the car upsets the concept of a final destination by “liberating” the traveler from the constraints of railroads, but it is clear that roads are always channeling the driver *somewhere*.

As Dean's petroanxiety increases, the pursuit of transformative experience on the road becomes steadily more extreme. Counter to the dominant environmental conscience that emerges largely in reaction to the threat of pollution during the 1960s and 1970s, Sal and Dean's interactions with the environment become progressively exploitative.³⁹ As Lhamon notes, "Sal observes but takes no responsibility for the connections he makes" (159). Neither Sal nor Dean spends the time to establish a deeper connection with his individual environment. In an almost sublime moment leaving New Orleans, Sal reminisces, "What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing?—it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies" (156). In this instant, the narrative voice seems drawn to the world, the actual dirt and land speeding past. If Sal's musings in this moment seem odd in their desire to deliberate people and place on more than a cursory level, Dean shatters any such consideration. "No, never-never!" he yells. The ruminative impulse is too slow for Dean, and thus for Sal by proxy. By constantly "leaning forward" they are effectively unable to step back and consider their own movement through and impacts upon environments, or the forces that dictate or direct their mobility.

Ultimately, *On The Road* reveals how deeply midcentury relationships to environment were shaped by the economy of petroculture. For the driver, it is far easier to manufacture representations of place—or, rather, to subscribe to already existing representations manufactured by petroculture (through travelguides or road construction). Sal continues traveling with Dean, even when he seems to recognize Dean's influence upon his own interiority: "With frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it" (206). On some level,

³⁹ "Introduction," *American Road Literature*, Ronald Primeau

Sal recognizes Dean's interaction with place lacks depth; as a part of Dean's retinue, his own interior perception begins to collapse as well. Unlike the early frontier narratives Sal reveres, the new western frontier narrative on the road is purely simulation: it lacks meaningful contact (LeMenager, 89). Sal's voodoo-vision of Louisiana, for example, is composed through stereotypes. The pair find themselves traveling a "dirt road" out of New Orleans, "elevated off the swamps that dropped on both sides and drooped with vines" (157). That Sal specifically notes the road is not asphalted suggests Louisiana is late in constructing new petro-infrastructures and at the same time renders the place uncanny. He sees what he describes as "the apparition" of a "Negro man in a white shirt walking along with his arms upspread to the inky firmament" (157). "He must have been praying," Sal guesses, "or calling down a curse" (157). Sal encounters the man through a speeding car window; both human and place are immediately racialized (the voodoo man worshipping the "inky firmament," constructs viewed through the "blur" of machine and road. Though Sal and Dean are the travelers, the one's moving through space without any connection to that space, the black man (who presumably lives there, as he is not hitchhiking) walking alongside the road (not driving on the road) is somehow strange, eerie. The man's difference—that is, a non-white man outwardly non-complicit in petroculture—actually frightens them: "We were scared too. We wanted to get out of this mansion of the snake, this mireful drooping dark" (157). In Sal and Dean's city passages, they revere black jazz musicians and urban black drivers. Yet, in rural American outside the sacred space of the road, the black man and surrounding environment are other to the road. Similarly, in Pecos Canyon they "examine an old Indian ruin" overtaken by tourists (161). Though not gestured to outrightly in the text, this seems a clear travelguide landmark: a place the tourist is lead to by petroculture maps, then guided in his/her experience/consumption of the site. Dean walks out "stark naked" to

shock other tourists. His action initially seems an act of resistance to petroculture's penchant to commodify space, particularly minority spaces *off* the road. Yet the stop is so brief, his deed has no impact. The tourists exposed to Dean's brand of counter-culture might be shocked momentarily, but they will quickly leave the site and move to the next landmark. Thus, Dean's action is *not* a streak of civil disobedience that disrupts the commodification of Native American space, but rather just a silly performance—a sort of precursor to the Merry Pranksters' "pranks" which I discuss later in the chapter. Rather than viewing either Louisiana or Pecos Canyon as complex environments, inhabited by both human and nonhuman, and each imbued with its own unique cultural-environmental history, both Sal and Dean contribute to the same tiresome palimpsest that rewrites histories of place with petroculture futures. "Place" is merely a vehicle for stimulation, for self-aggrandizement. Though Sal and Dean view themselves as separate from the vacationers they encounter, they too are tourists: they briefly encounter, quickly consume, and speed off.

This intentionally anachronistic reading reveals how difficult cultural dissidence to oil is within the framework of midcentury petrocultures, even in light of *On The Road's* revolutionary ethos. Criticism has historically missed the influence of oil in shaping social deviancy in the years after World War II, particularly within youth culture. Omar Swartz, for instance, describes Sal as a vertical deviant prior to meeting Dean, an "agitator" expressing "discontent *within* a value system" (67). When Sal and Dean come together, their agitation becomes lateral, wherein "they begin to question the value system itself" (69). Swartz claims Sal attempts "to create for himself a situation of freedom and experience by rejecting as insufficient the value base offered to him by his culture" (71). While the Beat persona may seem a rejection of postwar suburbia and capitalist commodification, the petroleum infrastructure facilitates that very stance of

resistance. It is the material resource that powers and directs deviant performance, obfuscated by oil mobility. Sal and Dean may decide which roads to drive, but they are limited to infrastructures already built and maintained by petro-industries. Even the “back-roads” are in essence trade routes. In Mexico, for instance, Dean claims “Indians” selling crystals along the side of the road “only *recently* learned to sell... since the highway was built ten years back—up until that time this entire nation must have been *silent!*” (297). Here, Dean’s voice—the ubiquitous, extravagant voice of oil—ties oil exuberance to commerce. Voice is strictly reserved for those participating in road-side commerce; before the road, Dean posits Mexico was inaccessible—unconsumable—and therefore silent. Though contemporary readers understand a vast culture of native Mexicans existed long before the highway, for Dean the road itself signals culture. The reality of people and place does not exist outside of his own experience of mobility. At points, Dean tries to deny the group’s ties to oil: “They have worries, they’re counting the miles, they’re thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they’ll get there” (209). Perhaps Dean is surprisingly and sneakily self-critical in his suggestion that for anyone in *On The Road*, the absence of oil equals silence. More likely, however, is that he remains unable to recognize how oil has shaped his own interiority—and therein how the Beat aesthetic doubles as a midcentury petro-aesthetic.

Anticipating Fossil-Fuel Futurity

Looking back at *On The Road* from a contemporary vantage point problematizes oil consumption at the midcentury, yet it would be unfair to condemn Sal and Dean’s actions entirely. Neither character has been exposed to the issues of environmental misuse that emerged during the late 1960’s and 1970’s. The 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, which occurred over twenty

years after Sal's first journey west, was the first massive American oil spill covered by national media, visually revealing regional environmental damage to the nation.⁴⁰ During the 1950's, by contrast, there was little to no language for sustainability outside of early conservation writings. Even Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," central to concepts of sustainable living, became part of environmental rhetoric after U.S. environmentalism coalesced into a national movement. Oil scarcity in the 1970s, peak oil and Tough Oil in the 1990s and 2000s, and the realization of global climate change from the late-1980s onward represent major environmental breakthroughs that neither Sal nor Dean—nor Kerouac, for that matter—could be aware of. As American awareness of material dependency shifts, the human relationship to material changes; more specifically, the way in which petroleum mediates human and environmental contact shifts. This allows citizens the opportunity to reassess the material, to see oil as exhaustible or to connect oil extraction and petroleum by-products to our most serious environmental concerns.

While Sal and Dean remain unaware of their dependence upon petro-industries, there are moments within *On The Road* where the narrative voice seems to acknowledge cultural environmental misuse. Further, instances of dramatic irony register the text's fantasies concerning the pursuit of increased personal freedom and transcendence on the road. The minor character Old Bull Lee functions as an inverse to Dean specifically, one who registers an awareness of industry far beyond any other character in the text and—at the very least—problematizes the pursuit of personal freedom and transcendence on, and in the form of, the road. Recognizing Old Bull leads to other moments wherein the novel exceeds the bounds of its narrative, commenting on the futurity of petro-infrastructures Sal and Dean champion. Why do these uncertainties exist deep within the text, however unconscious Sal, Dean, or even Kerouac

⁴⁰ LeMenager covers the Santa Barbara oil spill in great detail in *Living Oil*.

himself might be of them? Even unconsciously, it seems there is some knowledge that models of consumption and waste during the mid-century contribute to socio-cultural trajectories that were—and remain—unsustainable. The doubts expressed by Old Bull are far more fringe-culture than Sal or Dean ever are but have more lasting resonance from a contemporary vantage point.

Old Bull is a conspiracy theorist and drug addict who lives near a river levee outside New Orleans.⁴¹ Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries levee systems on the Mississippi River were used to shape and harness the river's natural channel in order to increase shipping efficiency. The Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal (MRGO), for instance, significantly shortened the distance between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. As Louisiana developed into a center for American petroleum refining, leveed waterways were used to transport large quantities of crude oil from offshore drilling operations in the Gulf.⁴² Sal and Old Bull hope to “sit on the muddy bank and dig the Mississippi River,” but are unable to because a large fence surrounds the levee (148). “When you start separating the people from their rivers,” Sal asks, “what have you got?” Similar to his remark about the reeling world, this is a particularly odd question for Sal because it implies a sense of spatial awareness he does not regularly display throughout the novel. Old Bull seems an influence here as he lives amidst an environment undeniably influenced by the production and consumption of oil (refining industries in Louisiana and the levee itself). Rivers were the nation's first important transport arteries—the nation's first roads. As highways supplant rail and river transport, Americans are urged towards petro-infrastructures and away from rivers; at the same time, rivers are closed off from citizens but limiting access strictly to industry. Both characters briefly recognize the Mississippi River as more than a shipping lane

⁴¹ The character Old Bull Lee is based on William S. Burroughs.

⁴² <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/Missions/Environmental/MRGOEcosystemRestoration/HistoryofMRGO.aspx> The MRGO has come under increased scrutiny since Hurricane Katrina because many of the most damaging flood waters were traced back to breaks within this specific levee.

and something more akin to the vast ecosystem that shapes both the US and Americanness. Roads and rivers, in other words, cannot be separated from the environment because they are environmental features in their own right. As petroculture develops from the midcentury forward, however, these varying routes are separated—both geographically and culturally. Each commercial corridor is assigned a specific function and cordoned off, preventing alternative imaginings as petroculture once again rewrites spatial/cultural mythos. Old Bull asks Sal to consider the river in ways he has not previously. Momentarily, the river seems to stimulate Sal's environmental awareness, to prompt a consideration of environment beyond the self. Yet, as soon as he leaves sight of the Mississippi's waters, he reverts to the same consumptive patterns emblemized by petroculture on the road.

The ideological framework Old Bull reveals suggests that the most productive resistance to oil capitalism does not take place in the car or on the highway, but rather in the intellectual efforts that place the body in and amongst the material forces that shape environments. The speed, power, and adventure of the road are always and already tactically ordered, encountered, and socioculturally reincorporated. If we are bound to specific avenues—as the Mississippi River is by the levee—real resistance occurs when we generate or manifest alternatives to those plotted networks. Part of the reason Old Bull can reveal as much is due to his tempo. He is much slower than Dean and prefers reading and learning to speeding and jazz. His home is tied to the earth, a “dilapidated old heap with sagging porches running around and weeping willows in the yard,” as if waiting to be consumed by nature itself at any moment (142). He is a teacher, a mentor conveying the “facts of life, which he learned not only out of necessity but because he wanted to” (143). Old Bull works to reshape the mind through methodical, intellectual pursuit rather than Dean's speed-laced spirituality. Dean is “all energies and ready to go,” pushing himself and Sal

to once again frantically speed too fast through their world (155). Here, the novel gestures between two divergent routes: on the road with Dean (who cannot wait to move back into the system) or in the wetlands with Old Bull Lee (who asks others to at least consider the system). Old Bull senses Dean's petroanxiety through his increasing recklessness. "Dean has gotten worse," he tells Sal, "He seems to me to be headed for his ideal fate, which is compulsive psychosis dashed with a jigger of psychopathic irresponsibility and violence" (147). Dean's psychosis, his irresponsibility, and his violence are by-products of petroanxiety. Lee offers Sal a warning: "If you go to California with this madman you'll never make it" (147). We can interpret this warning literally, as premonition Dean's erratic behavior will leave them stranded somewhere or even place them in mortal danger. However, we can also interpret Old Bull's warning as symbolic of Dean's consumption—consumption of life, speed, or of natural resources like petroleum. No one can consume as much as Dean without consequences. In this moment, Old Bull speaks for the country: if the U.S. goes the way of Dean, there will be consequences. While neither Sal nor Dean takes Old Bull seriously, it is significant that the novel makes room for his voice and perspective, especially for contemporary readers aware that issues of pollution, waste, and rising carbon dioxide levels linked to petroleum extraction and consumption threaten global ecologies.

Old Bull is not critical of petroleum in its entirety. Rather, he is critical of unsustainable use, of commodification, planned obsolescence, and poor self-awareness. One of the reasons Old Bull's social commentary is not taken seriously is because his rhetoric flirts with conspiracy theory.⁴³ With some prescience, he directly connects his criticism of "Washington bureaucracy"

⁴³ While some of his more extreme ideas seem dismissible, for instance "a certain gum they've invented and they won't show it to anybody that if you chew it as a kid you'll never get a cavity for the rest of your born days," many of his theories are based in some developing truths revealed later in the twentieth-century (149).

and wasteful postwar America to the petro-industry: “These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last *forever*” (149). He is horrified by products manufactured to fall apart so additional products must be produced, continuing the cycle of purchasing that sustains toxic industries. “They prefer making cheap goods,” he continues, “so’s everybody’ll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around.” Here, Old Bull identifies how midcentury oil capitalism mediates mobility by systematizing bodies through labor and routine. Where Sal and Dean conveniently overlook the labor that goes into manufacturing products, Old Bull recognizes tactics that organize and direct human bodies—the very same tactics that organize and direct drivers on the road. Old Bull distrusts oil capitalism and disapproves of Sal’s material dependence—Dean’s oil addiction. His criticisms lead to a subtle condemnation of Dean’s petro-dependence on tires: “And tires. Americans are killing themselves by the millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They could make tires that never blow up” (149).⁴⁴ Though Old Bull does not single him out, Dean’s work recapping tires makes him complicit within this critique. This entails a larger evaluation of Dean’s history and proficiencies, as well: his youth as a car thief, his expertise as a driver and mechanic, but most of all his unending quest for identity through the petroleum infrastructure. Dean calls for frenetic movement, where Old Bull calls for mediatory progress. For Dean, the products of oil capitalism are tools meant to be discarded, not waste symbolic of larger environmental and humanitarian crises as they are for Old Bull.

I frame Sal and Dean through the lens of oil capitalism, particularly because the journeys recounted in *On The Road* take place in the late-1940s, before the evolution of oil-chemical-capitalism that fully manifests petro-modernity over the course of the late-

⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, Dean spends a lot of time working for petro-industries, but he specifically works as a mold-man, someone who constructs and deconstructs tires so they can be distributed and resold to car owners.

twentieth century. However, in 1957, *On The Road* exists on the brink of domestic implementation of petrochemistry. While the future of petroleum is unknown to characters in the 1940s, Old Bull's voice in the novel reveals a growing awareness throughout the 1950's of oil as the material foundation of postwar America. His voice predicts the cultural trajectory of production and waste that will necessitate conversations on sustainability thirty-plus years in the future. Through Old Bull, the text is able to comment outside of temporal constraints, to reach beyond the bounds of its narrative and present a critique of oil capitalism's future. Unfortunately, Old Bull plays the role of a mid-century John the Baptist: he rants and raves in his "wilderness" outside New Orleans, while Sal and Dean take to the road again.⁴⁵ Sal is more impressed with his fervor than his message: "He was magnificent," Sal says, admiring Old Bull's passion without acknowledging the implications of his speech (150). This is in part because Old Bull cannot assign culpability to any one source; the closest he comes is to call out Washington and Moscow. Even for Old Bull Lee it is hard to identify oil capitalism as the root of racial, sexual, and environmental concerns that plague later stages of petro-modernity. The only real action he takes is to build a bookshelf from found wood "that'll last a *thousand years!*" (149). The implication is that Old Bull wants to remain stationary—not intellectually static, but geographically fixed with tools to incite the mind into perpetuity. The road, on the other hand, seems rich with spiritual treasures waiting to be discovered. If Old Bull Lee's social resistance is one of plodding permanence, it directly conflicts with the immediate, ephemeral, soaring high found in speed pleasure. Dean, and by proxy Sal, is not interested in Old Bull's intellectual counterculture, his gradual defiance of U.S. oil capitalism. Both remain unaware of the ways petrocultures continue to shape the nation's geographies, economies, and politics—and thus, their own interiority.

⁴⁵ To be fair, he is more like John the Baptist with an arsenal of automatic weapons.

Comparing Old Bull with Sal and Dean exposes how difficult it is to imagine—much less actualize—life off the road. Keeping this comparison in mind, each of the novel’s four road trips becomes exponentially more desperate. The final journey sends Sal and Dean beyond national borders, journeying deep into Mexico as if a new country might succeed where the U.S. has seemingly failed. The movement across borders reflects the United States’ expansion throughout geopolitics; inasmuch, it equally signifies oil’s increasing importance on a global scale. Postwar oil exuberance extends beyond national boundaries, reaching into Mexico, Canada, and particularly the Middle East where the vast majority of U.S. oil imports originate. As with each previous journey, the vault through Mexico ends in disappointment until the novel finally refuses to follow Dean on another wild ride. Perhaps the most telling moment within *On The Road* occurs in Mexico City, when manic Dean abruptly leaves Sal, sick with “fever... delirious and unconscious” (301). “Poor Sal, poor Sal, got sick,” Dean rambles. “Stan’ll take care of you. Now listen to hear if you can in your sickness: I got my divorce from Camille down here and I’m driving back to Inez in New York tonight if the car holds out” (301). The novel comes full-circle: Sal, who began the novel stationary and divorced, is left alone while Dean, just divorced, continues to test the limits of his material universe. When the rear end of his car gives out near Lake Charles, Louisiana, Dean wires his soon-to-be wife Inez for airplane fare (303). He then leaves the road and flies to New York City, accelerating once again to new speeds and heights made possible by advances in the petroleum industry.

Months later, Sal begins his trek back to New York, hitchhiking as he did on his first journey west. His return covers a total of one paragraph. Sal describes the trip as a struggle, evoking none of the grandiose language from earlier in the novel (303). He, like the text, seems exasperated with the road, “hurried” back to New York City as if to hide away in the city. The

last pages offer the novel's most intense dramatic irony. After an unspecified break, Dean shows up in New York City to drag Sal along on another cross-country venture. This time, Sal refuses to join him. Separate from Dean, Sal seems happy: he is healthy again and has been seeing a woman named Laura. When he meets up with Dean, he is headed to the opera in a big Cadillac. Dean, on the other hand, is in withdrawal. Standing alone outside of Penn Station, "ragged in a moth-eaten overcoat," he becomes simply one more addict who cannot get a fix. When Remi Boncouer, a friend from Sal's first trip, refuses Dean one last ride, Remi simply states: "You can't teach the old maestro a new tune" (306). Dean is refused access to the Cadillac, the vehicle that once personified his speed. Here, Sal and Dean finally diverge. Try as they might to "dig the whole world," they will never reach "IT." They have gone as far as they can. Here we evoke Old Bull one last time: Dean's petroanxiety, his desperation coupled with alternative forms of oil mobility is not a new or different avenue, but rather the expansion of that same road into a runway or superhighway. Dean's flight is the true marker of the transition from oil capitalism into oil-petrochemical-capitalism and the early phases of petro-modernity

Reconsidering *On The Road* after the failures of the fourth and last journey, it is clear the pursuit of transcendence on the road always exists just beyond reach. When Sal first leaves New York City, he must quickly confront the fact that Route 6 will not lead him west. Standing in the rain for hours on the side of an empty highway, Sal finally hitches a ride at the local gas station. The driver informs him: "'there's no traffic passes through 6. If you want to go to Chicago you'd do better going across the Holland Tunnel in New York and head for Pittsburgh'" (11). The experience of the road is obfuscated by Sal's idealistic vision of what his mobility *ought* to be. He realizes this himself, drying in the backseat of a stranger's car: "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line

across America” (11). At this early moment, then, the novel already proposes that it is “screwed up” to believe that the road, emblematic of the fixed postwar identity Sal and Dean seem to oppose, could offer the kind of freedom they desire. They are not special: they are merely two of thousands of Americans coopted, reoriented, and redistributed on the road.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test and *On The Road*’s Lasting Influence

In spite of *On The Road*’s blind ties to consumer industry through oil, the novel became a counterculture standard for later anti-conformist road narratives, particularly (and ironically) within anti-capitalist circles throughout the 1960s. LeMenager explains, “modern sociality and modern thinking have been shaped by driving” (90). *On The Road*’s incredible popularity lends truth to LeMenager’s claim, particularly given the cultural and artistic trajectory of later road narratives working within the framework of Kerouac’s bohemian project. Throughout the late-1950s and 1960s, disillusioned youth nationwide (culminating in the Hippie movement) took to the road imitating Sal and Dean.⁴⁶ Likewise, New Journalism writers including Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion adopted/adapted many of the novel’s formal innovations. After *On The Road*, the American road trip became both a part of popular culture and a form of social protest, depicting the road trip (as opposed to the family vacation) as a legitimate form of national protest. *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe’s 1968 rendering of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, is a product of and reaction to *On The Road*. Kesey’s 1964 road trip from California to New York City on a bus named “Furthur” was imagined as an homage to earlier Beat influences: a subversive, lawless journey east (rather than west) fueled by oil and LSD.⁴⁷ Not

⁴⁶ Kerouac famously clashed with the Hippie generation, refusing to be seen as a model for their movement.

⁴⁷ The road trip was initially imagined as a “superprank,” but had several goals: to shoot some film and make a documentary (one of the long goals within the text), to reach New York by the beginning of the World’s Fair, and to “be on hand... for the publication of Kesey’s second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*” (Wolfe, 67).

only did Neil Cassady (aka Dean Moriarty) convince Kesey to meet Kerouac and the East Coast Beats, but he drove the day-glo bus across the country. As a writer, Kesey was particularly excited about the prospect of connecting with Kerouac, who had become something of a literary icon. Upon reaching New York, however, “Kesey and Kerouac didn’t say much to each other,” according to Wolfe (102). For the Pranksters, New York was a “dirge,” a “town full of solemn, spent, irritable people shit-kicking their way down the sidewalks” (101). The experience was largely upsetting but helped confirm a long-held notion amongst the Pranksters: that they were the next evolutionary stage of bohemian counter-culture. Robert Stone explains the journey as “an uncanny reverse homage to *On the Road*,” with “Cassady at the throttle” and the bus hurtling “east over Eisenhower’s interstates” (Stone). Stone compares the journeys in terms of direction and speed: “Like *On the Road*, the bus trip exalted velocity” (Stone). Ana Sobral, however, views the bus trip as something *more*. Beat subculture, she explains, had “itself... lost its appeal” for the Pranksters while Kesey “has actually gone far beyond Kerouac” (146). The Pranksters believed they represented “something wilder and weirder out on the road,” a collective movement that pushed forward where *On The Road* ends (Wolfe, 102). Kerouac was “the old star,” and Kesey “the wild new comet from the West heading christ knew where” (102). While the Pranksters were in many ways “wilder and weirder” (the eastward journey on a bus full of acid-tripping Hippies that denies Kerouac’s old highways certainly amplifies lawless behavior), one undeniable connection between *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—emblemized by Cassady himself—is the perceived functionality of the road for deviant subcultures.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test offers a productive comparison to *On The Road* in part due to differing dissident methodologies but largely due to the texts’ deeply similar consumptive

patterns. While we often historicize the Beats and Pranksters together, the Pranksters had a more thought-out political radicalism.⁴⁸ In “When Kesey Met Kerouac,” Sterling Lord explains that, though seemingly kindred spirits, “The Beats and the Pranksters showed us different ways of opting out of society. They were both countercultural movements. The Beats were trying to change literature, and the Pranksters were trying to change the people and the country” (Lord). Lord implies that Kesey and Wolfe’s other subjects developed forms of social reform that were intended to instigate change outside of the self. However, as A. Carl Bredahl observes, the first half of the text consists of individual efforts to understand the boundaries of being human, ultimately a failing effort when confronted with the social and environmental realities of the 60s. Similarly, Michael Jacobs’s view of the Pranksters as dissenting totally from midcentury American normativity overlooks the degree to which “the ethos and ideology driving [Wolfe’s] subjects’ brand of consciousness expansion... is in line with more general, mainstream American values and ideals” (134). Though the Pranksters survived off a rejection of the “American Dream,” their commitment to “contemporaneous notion[s] of mainstream American ideals”—“individualism, freedom, and mobility”—draws them into material cycles of exploitation driven by oil-petrochemical-capitalism (Jacobs, 134).

Even as Beatnik and Hippie subcultures diverge, *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* share a similar compulsion to the road. Jason Haslem claims small moments of Beat romantic identity reveal a “portrayal of the problems of an American romantic notion of identity that makes universal claims about the transcendental potential of an individual” (Haslem, 446). Here, we can expand Haslem’s critique: *On The Road* contributes to a romantic literary, cultural tradition that promotes and promises individual transformation, a particular vision that is dictated

⁴⁸ The Prankster “style”—“great public put-ons they could perform”—focused on jarring, disruptive productions.

and determined by oil. Though *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* does not share the same romantic tendencies, the narrative suffers from many of the same idealizations at play in *On The Road*, particularly a commitment to petro-infrastructure that facilitate both the Pranksters' physical movement and the dissemination of their ideology. The Pranksters' reliance on corporate oil complicates the discursive interplay between the tradition of possessive, consumerist individualism and the desire for communal revolution. Rather than imagine Wolfe's memoir as a triumphant successor to *On The Road*, I propose that *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* observes deep ties between modern subjectivity and fossil fuel consumption—particularly within oil-petrochemical-capitalism. Ultimately, the consumptive impulse throughout the text conveys petroanxiety's influence in shaping human interiority—even through experiences one might not initially link to oil. These same consumptive impulses acknowledge the experience of the road as a distinctly influential weight upon later subjects. Even later travelers like Kesey, who exhibit far more self-awareness than Sal, remain mediated by the subjective, affectual qualities that initially draw Sal to the road: the speed, the false notions of freedom, the rejection of suburban heteronormativity. In other words, human interiority has been so utterly shaped by oil, that participation in petroculture, whether we like it or not, has become a prerequisite for modern life, even the dissident life. Wolfe plots a trajectory for road novels in the tradition of *On The Road* that implicates projects of social agitation and subjectivizes consumption through the 1960s.

Kesey and the Evolution of 1960s Counter-Culture

At first glance, the Prankster notion of flow—"they went with the flow, the whole goddamn flow of America" (84-85)—seems analogous to Sal's "kicks" in *On The Road*: the pursuit of individual fulfillment, to always "go positive with everything" and never "rise up

negative about anything” (84). Sobral explains these similarities as a “drive towards innovation through deviance” (145).⁴⁹ I claim “kicks” and “flow” begin to elaborate variances between Beat and Prankster deviance in their physiological/philosophical embodiment. “Kicks” and “flow” differ in their kinesthetic vs. cerebral focuses; that is, “kicks” hope to instigate spiritual change through bodily experiences, whereas the “flow” transpires primarily within the mind. “Kicks” are solely about the individual’s pleasure, while “flow” entails a collective experience. “The hunt for kicks,” Sobral writes, “prompted Dean to place his desires over everyone and everything else,” ultimately eliminating any possibility of “consciousness expansion” (149). What separates Kesey from Dean specifically is acknowledging others’ contributions to the “flow”; “intersubjectivity,” Scott MacFarlane claims, is at the heart of Wolfe’s text (MacFarlane, 104). Sal and Dean ascribe the imaginative possibility of experience beyond the material world to motoring speed. Yet, as Dean makes clear when he leaves Sal sick and alone in Mexico City, his attempts to reach transcendence on the road are overarchingly individual. When Sal becomes an impediment rather than an accelerant, Dean leaves him behind. He will not—cannot—let anyone obstruct his “kicks.” Dean needs his fix.

“Intersubjectivity” pushes back on the solely individual pursuit of pleasure on the road, implemented by Kesey’s acknowledgment of individual limitations and in the bus itself—an alternative to car-automobility. Over the course of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Kesey recognizes the limitations of individual sensory experience through what he terms “sensory lag”:

A person has all sorts of lags built into him, Kesey is saying. One, the most basic, is the sensory lag, the lag between the time your senses receive something and you are able to react. One-thirtieth of a second is the time it takes, if you are the most alert person alive,

⁴⁹ She compares the “fictionalized Kesey” in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* with Dean and Randall McMurphy, the protagonist of Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

and most people are a lot slower than that. Now, Cassady is right up against that 1/30th of a second barrier. He is going as fast as a human can go, but even he can't overcome it. He is a living example of how close you can come, but it can't be done. You can't go any faster than that. You can't through sheer speed overcome the lag. (144)

Kesey is committed to overcoming material restraints. Bredahl explains that, "Kesey began with the urge to create from within himself and to involve himself in his world, drives which suggest a need to experience fully what it means to be human" (76). Here, I would expand upon Bredahl's critique: that, like Sal and Dean, Kesey attempts experience beyond human, material limitations. In an important distinction from *On The Road*, however, Kesey recognizes sensory limitations that neither Sal nor Dean fully comprehend.

The transition from "kicks" to "flow" reflects heavily on the failures of the Beat-era. Cassady serves as an example of this failure: if he cannot overcome sensory lag, no one can. This is partially an admiration of his energy (who can equal manic Dean's energy?) but is also a veiled commentary on his experience. Sobral notes that Cassady has been "reduced to an amusing and somewhat puzzling relic of another era" (147). He is no longer a hero, nor is he the experienced guru who imparts necessary wisdom. Cassady's introduction (in a garage slinging tires) prefaces this disconnect, which continues throughout the work:

Cassady, Neil Cassady, was the hero, 'Dean Moriarty,' of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, the Denver Kid, a kid who was always racing back and forth across the U.S. by car, chasing, or outrunning, 'life,' and here is the same guy, now 40, in the garage, flipping a sledge hammer, rocketing about his own Joe Cuba and—talking. Cassady never stops talking. But that is a bad way to put it. Cassady is a monologist, only he doesn't seem to care whether anyone is listening or not. He just goes off on a monologue, by himself if

necessary, although anyone is welcome aboard. He will answer all questions, although not exactly in that order, because we can't stop here, next rest area is 40 miles, you understand, spinning off memories, metaphors, literary, Oriental, hip allusions, all punctuated by the unlikely expression, 'you understand.'” (Wolfe, 15)

Wolfe's Cassady is the faint echo of Kerouac's Dean. He is still full of energy and charisma, but he lacks an audience. Perhaps more pointedly, he no longer *cares* if he has an audience. Cassady monologues even when no one else is listening—though if they were, he allows no room for other voices. Cassady's rampant self-absorption does not match Kesey's push towards collectivity. Kesey explains that the only way to overcome “sensory lag” is “through some kind of total breakthrough” (144). By refocusing individual efforts through attempts at collective experience, Kesey hopes to stimulate the breakthrough Dean never could. Cassady may have been *the* Dean Moriarty from *On The Road*, but his ventures have nonetheless landed him right where all the other Pranksters currently stand.

The Pranksters' primary vehicle, the bus “Furthur,” is another clear indicator of Kesey's push for communal intellectual/spiritual transformation. The “Hieronymus Bosch bus,” an immense and peculiar vehicle designed to convey many passengers, seems a direct response to the self-contained, homogenous automobility fostered by the car (Wolfe, 71).⁵⁰ In her article “Essential Driving and Vital Cars,” Sarah Frohardt-Lane traces historical conflicts between the car and mass transit vehicles, specifically wartime propaganda during World War II that condemned public transportation and in turn claimed ride-sharing (car-pooling) as patriotic: “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler” (91). Throughout the war, the federal government

⁵⁰ Hieronymus Bosch was a fifteenth century Dutch painter who depicted religious scenes with wild color schemes and dark themes. I think Wolfe's implication here is the “Furthur” is viewed as a religious space, though reoriented in reaction to national Christian doctrine.

strictly rationed rubber and oil, reserving the vast majority of U.S. reserves for the military. Additionally, major automotive companies halted production of personal vehicles in 1942, diverting their industrial power to the war effort (Forhardt-Lane, 95). One would think mass transportation a natural solution to limited resources, yet Frohardt-Lane notes:

“car manufacturers actually delayed conversion to sell more cars” and influenced wartime propaganda to promote not only cars but the automotive industry itself as unilaterally patriotic. For instance, regular car maintenance (at service stations owned by oil and automotive companies) was publicized as “helping [to] win World War II.” (97)

“Furthur” suggests Prankster opposition to state and industry preference towards personal automobility. Moreover, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, forms of mass transportation became important sites of resistance to American injustice. Busses, specifically, helped nationalize the African-American Civil Rights Movement: in 1953, black citizens in Baton Rouge boycotted segregated city busses; Rosa Parks’ defiance of segregated bus seating sparked the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956; in 1961, Freedom Riders bussed back and forth across the South to protest segregated bus terminals.⁵¹ The Pranksters’ first national venture beyond Kesey’s home in La Honda, California is the road trip to New York City in 1964, at the height of the Civil Rights Movements and less than a decade after the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

“Furthur” advertises Prankster unity with African-American Civil Rights and other 1960s protest movements, a symbol of their participation within a larger collective cultural opposition. The very loud 1939 International Harvester bus painted in neon day-glo is meant to attract attention, to invite conflict, and, therein, break the average citizen out of their daily patterns.

⁵¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1304163>; <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-rides>

And yet, “Furthur” emblemizes the ways in which the Pranksters’ brand of social resistance is limited to and directed by roads and oil—in other words, subject to the same national commercial, industrial economic trajectory they hope to disrupt. Their oil dependency places them amongst and within the same deviant paradox that Sal and Dean experience before them. The bus is tied to the road indefinitely: it is old, consumes a lot of gasoline, and frequently needs mechanical assistance (some of which Cassady can perform). There is a noticeable petroanxiety in plotting how far the bus can travel before it needs more gas—in other words, how far the Pranksters can travel before they must submit to oil. Ironically, many of their “pranks” take place at service stations because service stations—nodes of oil commerce—are the spaces they most frequently interact with. During a fuel stop in Mobile, the Pranksters “jump out of the bus” and start throwing dozens of “red rubber balls around in a crazed way like a manic ballet of slick Servicecenter flutter decoration while the guy fills up the tank” (Wolfe, 92). While the “prank” is perhaps “weirder” than Dean’s streak at Pecos Canyon, the Pranksters are merely an irritation. The service station attendant still fills the gas tank and Kesey pays him. The transaction continues in spite of the Pranksters’ disruptive intentions. Likewise, Cassady’s role as the bus driver seems an all too obvious condemnation. He knows where all the rest stops and service stations are because he has memorized the highway. Still the addict, he retraces the same routes in search of his fix.

“Furthur” announces the Pranksters’ as dissident outcasts; at the same time, the bus helps reveal their deep ties to oil, their embeddedness within petroculture. As the postwar petroleum infrastructure expands—economically, geographically, but particularly culturally—those ties only tighten. The Pranksters’ view themselves as defiant citizens, even as they travel the superior roads (interstate highways) and use the new petrochemical products (plastics or day-glo paint)

that ultimately underpin the early stages of petro-modernity. They do not recognize the inherent citizenry that such consumption entails. With “Furthur” in mind, Kesey’s famous refrain—“You’re either on the bus or off the bus”—takes on a certain discursive irony that even he seems to miss. “Furthur” epitomizes transportation, while being “on or off the bus” is co-opted as an expression of being. In other words, “Furthur” embodies the Pranksters’ placement within petroculture. “The bus” represents Kesey’s collective style of civil disobedience. Kesey’s ultimatum, however, resonates beyond his own understanding: in boarding “Furthur,” one submits to Kesey’s *modus vivendi* (being “on the bus”) and to the *road* as well; that is, to the comfort and ease of postwar oil exuberance. Kesey unknowingly becomes both the enlightener *and* the enabler. Bredahl claims one of the failures in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is the Pranksters’ dependence on Kesey as a leader. “Kesey’s initial urge,” Bredahl explains, “had been personal, and he sought to extend his own perception while also stimulating others to begin perceiving for themselves” (78). Lost in the “flow,” the Pranksters begin to view Kesey as a fuel. Not only does he disseminate the group’s radical ideologies, but he finances the(ir) movement as well. Kesey becomes another veil through which the Pranksters’ consumption is obfuscated. “Furthur” and “the bus” begin to meld as collectivity transforms into reliance. The vehicle and the ideal fuse consumerist American normativity with notions of civil resistance. Both become an element of petroculture. And despite the Pranksters greatest efforts to upset cultural norms, their actions are dictated by material dependencies—petroculture seems, invariably, a bus one must simply be on.

Road “Tripping”: AcidConsumption as PetroConsumption

The most significant aberration throughout *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is LSD. Acid is a new fuel, an illicit energy that accelerates and reorients the mind outside the constraints of oil-petrochemical-capitalism. Kesey explains that other forms of lag (historical, social, psychological) exist simultaneously alongside sensory lag; each layer of lag must be overcome if one is to ever “breakthrough” (144-147).⁵² He believes that acid might help to break down those barriers, reaching deep into the psyche and manipulating consciousness. “Kesey’s drive is to keep moving, to explore new energies,” Bredahl writes. “He has no question about *whether* possibility exists or *whether* it is demonic; the energy is there, and Kesey wants to use it, go with its characteristics rather than impose his requirements on it” (71). Here, Bredahl alludes to both LSD’s function as an alternative energy source for the mind and the drug’s role in promoting Prankster collectivity (“trips” are meant to be shared experiences). Acid proposes an affectual/intellectual/spiritual alternative concurrent with petroaffect and speed pleasure, an alternative that at times threatens oil as the primary fuel on display in the text. Perhaps LSD is the new spiritual propellant, an alternative to fossil fuels that reveals the hallucinatory aspects of the old one? Despite Kesey’s initial idealistic intentions for the drug, I argue that acid too is drawn into patterns of consumption rooted in petroculture. LSD’s complicated material history links the drug to petroculture through American postwar geopolitical expansion—a contest between nation-states to control global oil reservoirs. Once acid becomes an ideology—more than simply an intellectual stimulant—distribution and consumption are increasingly reliant on postwar petro-infrastructure. In turn, acid is commodified. Rather than “going with the flow,” the Pranksters harness acid energy the way petro-modernity harnesses oil energy. Ultimately, this version of consumption induces the same patterns of petroanxiety that we observe on the road.

⁵² Though Kesey explicates this to the Pranksters late in the text, it is unclear if this recognition is the result of “tripping” or is something he has been mindful of previously.

Viewing acid as an illicit black-market substance outside of normative capitalism oversimplifies what is a much more complicated material history. Kesey's initial experiences with—and accesses to—LSD were overseen by the Army. In late-1959, Vic Lovell, a friend attending graduate school for psychology, mentioned psychedelic testing to Kesey, noting participants were paid 75 dollars a day to get dosed in “nicely calcimined and clinical” environments (Wolfe, 40). “Lovell told him about some experiments the Veteran's Hospital in Menlo Park was running with ‘psychomimetic’ drugs,” Wolfe recalls, “drugs that brought on temporary states resembling psychosis” (40). Kesey volunteered (prior to the commercial success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the Kesey family needed the money) and was first dosed later that same year. LSD instigates biological and neurological fluctuations by manipulating serotonin receptors that alter the way the mind and body process information—similar to the physiological changes one experiences through speed. Wolfe describes the first moments of Kesey's initial trip through sensory stimuli: “suddenly he is like a ping-pong ball in a flood of sensory stimuli, heart beating, blood coursing, breath suspiring, teeth grating” (41). Reminiscent of “blur” (the way objects are visually altered from a speeding car), acid affects vision—“He looks at the ceiling. It begins moving.... The ceiling is moving—not in a crazed swirl but along its own planes its own planes of light and shadow and surface” (40)—dilating the pupils, causing shifting, shimmering hallucinations. These stimulations—“coming up”—are merely the beginning of the trip: whereas the experience of speed in *On The Road* is primarily kinesthetic, “tripping” in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is primarily cerebral. The trip crescendos, increasingly loud and visually vibrant (“a great impacting of... *blue*”) until suddenly Kesey experiences a “realm of consciousness he had never dreamed of before” (40). As a journey framed through the mind, LSD seems to break beyond the limitations of the speed pleasures. The

drug doesn't simply deliver some romantic transformation: Kesey reaches stages of consciousness he never even imagined. Acid could take one further, deeper than other sensory experiences.

Kesey's first trips, however, were administered by medical professionals in a clinic—all for government research. Psychedelic trials were part of a larger network of experimental testing in the military and other branches of government with roots in weapons research during WWII. At the end of the war, chemical testing was reallocated domestically, justified under the auspices of national security in response to rising tensions with the Soviet Union. Though informally publicized, Kesey's psychedelic tests were classified; years later it would be revealed that Menlo Park was associated with Project MKUltra, a highly secretive controversial CIA operation that experimented with mind control through the use of psychedelics. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. and USSR competed for natural resources, but particularly oil which was necessary to power both nations' increasingly global militaries. The opposing world powers skirmished by destabilizing foreign governments, instigating proxy wars, and infiltrating external agencies rather than engaging in all-out warfare. The CIA hoped Project MKUltra would enhance interrogation techniques, perhaps even flip enemy operatives (Boon, 258). The CIA and Pranksters intended to use LSD for different purposes, but it is clear both groups acknowledge acid's potential to reorient the mind. Additionally, the psychedelic experiments run parallel to the proliferation of the petrochemistry after World War II, when wartime manufacturers established domestic markets for petroleum products. American citizens became both the test subjects and intended consumers of redistributed wartime surplus. Increasing oil demand necessitated government efforts to procure a larger supply. Illicit acid may have been central to Prankster and Hippie subculture, but the drug was part of a much larger movement to reconfigure

national economy and establish geopolitical influence throughout oil regions during postwar exuberance (Buell, 81).⁵³

Once outside of the laboratory, LSD seemed outside the bounds of normative capitalism. MacFarlane writes, “had the U.S. Government not opened Pandora’s Box with its widespread testing of this and similar drugs on civilian guinea pigs, then it’s hard to imagine this psychedelic era coalescing with such fervor” (115). Though the drug was not yet illegal in 1965 (during the period of the Pranksters “acid tests”) it was certainly of black-market renown, distributed on the street rather than through legal economic channels. Further, acid was cheap and powerful (MacFarlane, 117). One needed only a few extra dollars and shady contacts to take the “trip,” something Sal had to plan for months before embarking westward. Here again, Prankster counterculture separates itself from Beat predecessors: as the notion of intersubjectivity came to dominate the acid experience, disseminating the drug itself became tantamount to the spread of ideology. LSD is, as MacFarlane puts it, the “Pranksters proselytizing agent” (116). Wolfe describes the “acid tests” as the ritualistic manifestation of Kesey’s LSD meditations: “For it has been written:... *he develops a strong urge to extend the message to the people... he develops a ritus, often involving music, dance, liturgy, sacrifice, to achieve an objectified and stereotyped expression of the original spontaneous religious experience*” (230). Likewise, the “acid tests” were conceived not as capitalist ventures, nor as determinative spiritual journeys: “People could take LSD or speed or smoke grass and lie back and experience what they would, enclosed and submerged in a planet of lights and sounds such as the universe never knew” (231). The drugs were “free” (supplied by Augustus Owsley and the Pranksters) and the experience went

⁵³ MacFarlane notes that the authors of *Acid Dreams* claim “U.S. Government testing of the drug was still underway on foreign campuses as recently as 1991 suggesting that covert interests in the drug still persists in certain official circles” (125). The notion that acid, once illegal, was no longer within government purview is patently false.

wherever the “flow” went.⁵⁴ The “acid tests” were the natural evolution of what many in the counterculture viewed as resistance to capitalist ideology. Wolfe writes, “How to get it across to the multitudes who have never had this experience themselves? *You couldn’t put it into words*” (231). Rather than creating change through literature, the Pranksters attempted interior transformations that did not require a car or gasoline. Rather than viewing the car and road as instigators of personal change, the Pranksters view them as the apparatus and network to propel change.

Transitioning from the more private collective experiences at La Honda to social outreach through drugs transformed the Pranksters from “outlaws” at the edge of the City to a movement more akin to religious hierarchies. The Pranksters unknowingly institutionalize acid. In so doing, they exhibit the same dependencies and anxieties that complicate and ultimately undermine earlier anti-conformist road narratives. Sobral argues the Hippies went further than the Beats, “the culmination of a cultural revolution based largely on the glorification of deviance and initiated by the Beats one decade earlier” (154).⁵⁵ Though the lasting national impact of the Hippie Generation potentially outweighs Beat influence, Hippie countercultures—and especially the Pranksters—are unable to divest their movements from America’s oil undercurrent. The acid wave is the culmination of a consumptive pattern always and already rooted in petroculture. As the acid tests grew, the goal became spreading this enlightenment to as many people as possible, meaning mass transport via the nation’s highways—even idea(l)s have to get on the bus. Acid was disseminated largely through travel—even more importantly, travel on America’s new interstate highways, the crystallization of American oil capitalism (115). The Pranksters may

⁵⁴ Augustus Owsley was the primary manufacturer of acid on the west coast and the provider for Kesey after government testing ended. There is, however, mention of buying a ticket, so it seems the parties had admission, though never is there any notion of profit—at least from any of the Pranksters.

⁵⁵ She quotes the Beat poet Gregory Corso, who wrote, “the Hippies lived out what the Beats had written about” (154).

have viewed the dissemination of the drug as socially and culturally liberating, but they were only ever able to distribute by liberating the power inherent in oil. Thus, even if LSD offered a spiritual, affectual alternative to speed—a new fuel to power transcendent experience—that transcendence is always and already tactically monitored and distributed by the machines, gasoline, and road networks that sustain oil capitalism.

The very mythos Wolfe explains was the *bête noire* for Hippie counterculture—the “Fantasyland” with which Kesey was originally disillusioned, “Gregg’s Drive-In on a Saturday night” with families in their “white Pontiac Bonneville sedan—*the family car!*—a huge crazy god-awful-powerful fantasy creature to begin with, 327 horsepower, shaped like twenty-seven nights of lubricious luxury brougham seduction” (Wolfe, 39)—actually sustained and accelerated their counterculture. Comparing “Furthur” to the “white Pontiac,” the symbol of the normative culture from which the Pranksters purposefully marginalized themselves, conveys the paradoxical nature of Prankster counterculture. The bus is the key to what Sobral points out is central to midcentury generational identity: “the simultaneous celebration of self-fulfillment and collective action” (154). In pursuit of these seemingly antithetical missions, Kesey and others must consume endlessly and at will. The Pranksters’ bus “trip” is a road trip in more ways than one: both as an extension of *On The Road*’s physical road journey and as an opportunity to take the “trip” of LSD to its furthest limits. Early, “the bus” and LSD become integrally connected: “Furthur” provides a trip, yet “the trip was always the bus” (Wolfe, 119). An acid “trip” is not inherently reliant on mobility; however, the consumptive efforts to attain that experience propagate and are propagated by petroinfrastructures at the foundation of American material and cultural excess. Here, we might imagine acid “energy” in two senses: first, the imaginative, spiritual energy that Bredahl refers to and, second, the material energies that underlie Beat,

Prankster, and Hippie countercultures. That Kesey is willing and able to consume without regard, within the very systems and networks he hopes to oppose, is fundamentally problematic. Here, I am not implying that Kesey would have been more successful practicing a version of sustainability, but rather that the version of consumption he *does* practice—both spiritually and ecologically—is designed by and purveyed through the cultural vision of fossil fuels.

Finally, the threads of anti-capitalist, socialist communalism that inevitably become central to the acid ideology are *too* rooted in the swelling postwar exuberant oil economy. The Pranksters' endeavors were only made possible by the large amounts of money Kesey made through sales of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. The bus trip, the acid tests, and the Pranksters' movie was exceedingly expensive:

The film had already cost a staggering sum, about \$70,000, mostly for color processing. Kesey had put everything he had gotten from his two novels plus the play adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* into Intrepid Trips, Inc. His brother, Chuck, who had a good creamery business in Springfield, Oregon, invested to some extent. George Walker's father had set up a trust fund for him, with strings on it, but he contributed when he could. By the end of 1965, according to Faye's [Kesey's wife's] bookkeeping, Intrepid Trips, Inc., had spent \$103,000 on the various Prankster enterprises. Living expenses for the whole group ran to about \$20,000 for the year, a low figure considering that there were seldom fewer than ten people around to be taken care of and usually two or three vehicles. Food and lodging were all taken care of by Kesey. (137)⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Very little of the movie was ever actually produced or released—perhaps a fact that actually validates the project. Though the group ascribed great potential to the film—this was their work of art, what they believed would make lasting impact and change—is, in my mind, the least interesting aspect of the project, a way to justify imbibing large quantities of drugs while driving around the country.

These are staggering sums of money, particularly in light of the Hippie generation's claim to eschew material goods. The movie, a collage of subjective stories meant to mix and swirl together (a visual representation of the acid experience), produced very little actual video for enormous financial cost. Within the text, the movie feels a feigned justification for Kesey and others to play with electronics: microphones, speakers, and recording equipment that later became central to the acid tests. Finally, all of this communal disobedience being funneled through an incorporated business—Intrepid Trips, Inc.—indicates a more corporate atmosphere than one would expect—which is to say nothing about the treatment of Faye, Kesey's wife, a minor character in the text left to keep track of the finances.⁵⁷ As Wolfe points out, \$20,000 a year for living expenses is not particularly egregious considering the number of people the Kesey family supported; however, Kesey functioning as the financial locus for so many undermines Prankster marginality even in fostering Prankster collectivity. For many, living at the “Edge of the City”—to not be beholden to urban centers of commerce and thus not residing in the suburbs—was only made possible through the great commercial success of one. These financial dependencies and extreme expenses call into question the motivations of so many cultural “dissidents.” Sobral writes, “while Kesey appears to be motivated by a genuine desire to reach ‘further,’ the latter are mainly attracted by the excitement of marginality” (152). In other words, the Pranksters are tourists: the same exploitative subjects we witness in *On The Road*, whose social and ecological relationships are obfuscated by their easy access to and consumption of oil.

These failures, each problematic in its own right, are all rooted in the exploitative practices of midcentury oil capitalism: to extract, manipulate, and consume at will for the

⁵⁷ Wolfe describes Faye as “the eternal beatific pioneer wife, in the house, at the stove, at the sewing machine, at the washing machine, with the children, Shannon and Zane, gathered around her skirts” (56). Much like Dean with Camille, Kesey's indictment of heteronormative monogamy as one aspect of his social protest seems fundamentally suspect once one realizes Faye is relegated to all the domestic duties the Pranksters are no longer responsible for.

purposes of individual pleasure. Most damning is the failure of the collective experience LSD is predicated upon. While communal experience—“intersubjectivity,” as some call it, “as if our consciousnesses have opened up and flowed together” (Wolfe, 61)—was supposed to be at the heart of the “trip,” synchronicity is an imagined effect of what is, at its core, a highly individual experience. When one’s individual “trip” deviates from the “flow,” the deviation is abandoned. Stark Naked, who goes “stark raving mad,” roars “off into the void” only to be arrested and “closed in the County psychiatric ward” (86-87). Wolfe writes, “This woman... had completed her trip.... Stark Naked had done her thing.” One can sense the derision in Wolfe’s voice: her “thing” had led her to the mental ward, “and that was that, for the Pranksters were long gone” (87). Sandy, who takes “[u]nauthorized acid,” looks to Kesey for reassurance that he is still “on the bus”: “Kesey says very softly: ‘I know how you feel, Sandy. I’ve been there myself. But you just have to stay with it’—which makes Sandy feel good: *he’s with me*” (97). That in moments of crisis Kesey clearly occupies the apex of a hierarchy is troubling, because he can in essence allow or deny the trip. Immediately after his reassurance, Kesey looks to Sandy and says, “But if you think I’m going to be your guide for this trip, you’re sadly mistaken.” Kesey is the gatekeeper and Sandy realizes he is not “on the bus”. During his “lag” monologue late in the text, what Kesey perceives as synchronicity—“Kesey giggles slightly and says, ‘I think maybe we’re really synched up tonight’”—is merely his disciples blindly agreeing with him (145). The urge towards intersubjectivity seems to diverge from Sal and Dean’s exploitative contact in *On The Road*; yet, time and time again characters who are not “on the bus” are left behind. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is not a celebration of heroic figures who achieve spiritual deliverance. Rather, it is an indictment of American conformity within the Pranksters. When Kesey and the Pranksters assume a way out of oil-petrochemical-capitalism, they in fact delve

deeper into the troubling corporate, regulatory material culture they hope to disrupt. LSD does not pose a true alternative to midcentury petro-subjectivity. Likewise, the Pranksters do not conceptualize a viable alternative to the Beat aesthetic formed on the road. What Kesey mistakes as “awareness,” a higher spiritual plane that is not “a dream or delirium,” is merely an acceleration of the chemical reactions brought on by speed, made possible by oil (40).

Monkeywrenching and Concluding Alternatives

On The Road's literary legacy observes a range of petrocultures increasingly representative of materiality at midcentury. Likewise, midcentury petrocultures contribute to a more complicated ideology of consumption that extends into our present. This is to say that, in spite of the massive material systems that support the petroleum infrastructure and attract midcentury countercultures to speed and sensory manipulation, oil capitalism (and later oil-petrochemical-capitalism) fundamentally alters conceptions of American freedom and individualism into our present day. If *On The Road* shows how reliant Americans are (have become and are becoming) upon the petro-modernity, then *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* shows how deeply petroaffect functions in shaping and reshaping human interiority—even in those realms not traditionally associated with oil. Mobility—not merely physical movement and transportation but the imaginative, artistic expression of the mind—is, at midcentury, utterly tied to the industrial, postmodern potentials of oil. As *On The Road* indicates, when the expression of ideas becomes increasingly dictated by material dependencies, there is a danger in mistaking freedom for freedom myths, in confounding counterculture with the hastening of a consumptive pattern that is genuinely toxic. This is particularly true when the material itself is volatile, as oil has proven to be.

If Prankster counterculture—from communal living to pranks to acid—is merely an accelerated repetition of the failures dramatized in *On The Road*, are there alternative methods of sociocultural dissidence that are not undermined by dependence upon corporate oil? LeMenager points to walking, or “pedestrianism” more specifically, as one method of productive cultural response. “Pedestrianism” refers to physical action that, one, is not powered by oil (but rather by human/natural biological processes) and two, reorients humans in relation to the petroleum world they inhabit. She writes, “Pedestrianism becomes a political action and therapy, a means of moving (literally and physically) against the melancholy of oil dependence”—here, I might add the mania of oil dependence as well (LeMenager, 141). In walking, the human is not limited to roads; one can inhabit a world “with a conscious intention of plotting it for yourself, so that you can feel and know it, as a geographically empowered resident, citizen.” In this, too, LeMenager evokes an entirely different form of sensory acquisition—one that is not reliant on the ever-increasing need for speed stimulation. Pedestrianism recalls Old Bull Lee’s slower, more methodical lifestyle. It encourages physical awareness and mental governance that becomes immaterial during midcentury oil exuberance. The security and comfort of easy oil stimulates many aspects of American life during the 1950s and 1960s; however, it also obfuscates the American’s role as a consumer, as a polluter, and as an exceptionalist. Easy oil redirects progressive humanitarianism inwards. After a while, the petro-consumer reflects the indulgent, self-aggrandizing oil mythos that perpetuates petroculture into the 1970s and beyond. Pedestrianism demands one consider the action and vitality of the world that exists amongst and outside of one’s own self.

Two other forms of protest I might offer as alternatives to the freedom myths perpetuated in *On The Road* depend on a similar type of reorientation: a self-awareness that at once

recognizes the literal and physical self in contact with one's environment and sociocultural position. First, Kesey's speech at the Vietnam Day Committee's anti-war protest in Berkeley in 1965 recognizes the need for something *different*, a radical rethinking of what protest itself might entail. "You know," Kesey says:

"you're not going to stop this war with this rally, by marching. ... That's what they do. ... They hold rallies and they march. ... They've been having wars for ten thousand years and you're not going to stop it this way. ... Ten thousand years, and this is the game they play to do it... holding rallies and having marches... and that's the game you're playing... their game" (Wolfe, 222).

Many of the protesters, some 15,000 or more, were angered by the notion that their activism was ineffectual: "Who the hell invited this bastard!... He's ruining the whole goddamn thing" (224).⁵⁸ But Kesey stumbles on an important distinction: the difference between marching and pedestrianism. Marching is tactical, ordered, and implies systemic participation. Each participant must step perfectly in-synch for the march to be successful. "Marching" is "their *game*," he says, a game "they" have been successfully playing for "*ten thousand years*." By "marching," the Committee repeats the same rhetorical strategies that initially justified the war. Kesey's response is to remove citizens from that rhetoric: "*There's only one thing to do. ... [T]here's only one thing's gonna do any good at all. ... And that's everybody just look at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say... Fuck it.*" Though not exactly pedestrianism, Kesey asks the Committee to simply walk away. This advice, at first, seems to lack concrete impact—it is certainly contrary to activist methodologies that dominated the 1960s—saying "Fuck it" means non-participation in *systemic* wrongdoing—the evil of a system that cannot be overthrown by being *more* like, out-

⁵⁸ Some actually blame Kesey and the Pranksters for the death of the progressivist anti-war movement, noting that once acid hit the scene Hippies became socially uninvested (Sobral, 152).

mobilizing, *faster* than what one opposes. Kesey is not condemning people coming together; rather, he critiques their approach to change—he sees the potential transformation their collective action *should* instigate. Ironically, when the Committee begins to march, Wolfe describes the crowd as confused and unorganized, not sure whether they should confront the “phalanx of police and National Guard” or turn back (225). Again, “marching” is “their game” and “they” are much better at it. “Turning back” is equated with Martin Luther King Jr., “about the worst thing you could call anybody on the New Left at that time” because Martin Luther King Jr. had “turned back at a critical moment on the bridge at Selma” (225). What the protestors do not understand—what Kesey was trying to convey—is that confrontation in and of itself does not equate to meaningful change. MLK’s march across the bridge at Selma, for all the ire it aroused among white California leftists, disrupted an important arterial roadway. King’s march recognizes what the Committee does not: that disrupting the material infrastructures of modernity through nonviolent means—without the confrontation—reorients our notions of how, where, and when action is most effective.

Kesey also inadvertently makes a commentary on the Pranksters: that, in order to oppose petro-modernity, one cannot simply accelerate past it, consuming the very materials that support and grow oil-petrochemical-capitalism. Speed pleasure in *On The Road* and acid in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* both hope to rise above the confinements of petro-modernism via the extraction of extreme sensory experiences—yet it is that very cycle of endless extraction and consumption that drives the petroleum-infrastructure. This brings me to the second form of alternative protest that reorients human action against the tentacular action of oil: monkeywrenching or ecotage. Coined in Edward Abbey’s 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, monkeywrenching forces confrontation with systemic environmental misuse, taking an

anarchistic stance towards industrial modernity. Monkeywrenching hearkens to sabotage, which Abbey defines in the novel's preface, referencing French laborers ruining machinery with wooden shoes. Ecotage took on National import with the creation of EarthFirst!, a new band of dissidents dubbed "eco-terrorists" who sought to disrupt capitalist endeavors that stripped nature of material resources without regard for environmental consequences. EarthFirst! describes monkeywrenching as "a step beyond civil disobedience. It is non-violent, aimed only at inanimate objects. It is one of the last lines of defense of the wild, a deliberate action taken by an Earth defender when almost all other measures have failed" (EarthFirst). Ecotage can vary in degrees of action: John Hannah, who founded the Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) was imprisoned in 1977 for firebombing several cropdusters responsible for the spread of dangerous pesticides. However, probably the most famous version of monkeywrenching occurs in Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* when Abbey, confronted by surveyors from the Department of Transportation charged with planning and staking new roads in Arches National Park, walked the length of their work pulling the stakes from the ground. "A futile effort," Abbey writes, acknowledging the inevitable push of industrial modernity, "but it made me feel good" (Abbey, 433).

Ecotage—which gained popularity during the late-1970s and 1980s (Brinkley, xxii)—is inherently destructive; it is action (even if "futile") and functions both as a realization of Kesey's appeal to not play "their game" and as a direct counter to his plea for non-recognition. We might recognize ecotage as a reaction to the unsuccessful and whimsical pranks of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Monkeywrenchers react with force beyond the boundaries of state and federal law in an attempt to make physical, material changes to environments they perceive as threatened by encroaching industrial modernity. Glen Canyon Dam is the symbolic structure throughout *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (the whole novel leads towards the destruction of the dam and release of

Lake Powell); however, more importantly, most of the monkeywrenching that occurs in the novel targets cars and roads. More than anything, highway expansion signals a movement towards environmental domination that “defenders of the wilderness” recognize as petro-modernity’s propensity to commodify nature—what Abbey specifies as “Industrial Tourism” in *Desert Solitaire*. The spreading highway is symbolic of the extractive, consumptive culture of oil capitalism, a culture that can be impeded if roads are *not* constructed (or, if once constructed are destroyed). The origin of George Hayduke, the most memorable character of the novel, comes out of frustration with infringing highways, bridges, and dams: “My way, he thought, they’re going my way; they can’t do that. Gotta remove that bridge. Soon. Them bridges. Soon. All of them. Soon. They’re driving their tin cars into the holy land. They can’t do that; it ain’t legal. There’s a law against it. A higher law” (Abbey, 27). Hayduke recognizes that the bridges that span southwestern canyons both nullify natural boundaries and allow for hastened spread of petro-infrastructures.

Both Kesey’s non-recognition and the monkeywrencher’s view of wilderness are, however, problematically romantic. Kesey’s non-recognition evokes the problems of class privilege that are really at the heart of Wolfe’s critique throughout *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. To “*turn your backs*” necessitates a degree of financial support and class privilege that many Americans cannot exercise. Similarly, though *The Monkey Wrench Gang* champions ecotage as a response to the expansion of petro-infrstructures, we are left to wonder *who* is able to take such action and *what* that action can actually accomplish. In the prologue, an imposter construction worker (presumably setting charges to blow up a new bridge built above Glen Canyon Dam) has the phrase “AMERICA: LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT ALONE” stitched in the back of his coveralls (4-5). Hayduke sees cars, roads, and bridges as an intrusion in “the holy

land,” justifying his radical methods through a “higher law” (27). Whose “higher law” does Hayduke refer to? This is even more complicated when he recognizes his own complicity in the systems he opposes:

“Well you’re doing it too, he reminded himself. Yeah, but I’m on important business. Besides, I’m an elitist. Anyway, the road’s here now, might as well use it. I paid my taxes too; I’d be a fool to get out and walk and let all them other tourists blow their foul exhaust gases in my face, wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t I? Yes I would. But if I wanted to walk—and I will when the time comes—why, I’d walk all the way from here to Hudson Bay and back. And will.” (27)

Hayduke justifies his participation through a moral/ethical imperative that is at best hierarchical—at worst, “elitist.” And though he claims his willingness to walk, he feels that is only possible once the roads and cars that symbolize petroculture are violently immobilized. He would be a “fool” not to use those networks in his own dissidence, but like Sal and Dean, that participation—including his knowledge that as a citizen, taxpayer, and driver he contributes to the construction of petro-infrastructures—problematizes his resistance to petro-modernity. If he is waiting until “the time comes,” it seems he will be waiting indefinitely.

Thus, we end up back at LeMenager’s notion of pedestrianism, specifically as it achieves a break from petro-infrastructures *and* reshapes human interiority. Pedestrianism does not deconstruct oil-petrochemical-capitalism, but rather deconstructs the individual’s orientation within petro-modernity. Likewise, it encourages a more nuanced and informed environmental *praxis*, informed by the realities of climate change, Tough Oil, and late capitalism. One thing monkeywrenching requires is a deeply connected sense of one’s contact with one’s environment.

It is no coincidence that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was published in 1975, after the first OPEC oil embargo, which for all intents and purposes ended postwar American oil exuberance. It was during this moment that Americans were forced to reexamine their material relationship to oil. Unlike Sal and Dean in *On The Road*, national oil scarcity required Americans in the 1970s to recognize their material dependencies. This, coupled with the rise of environmentalism and the realization of ecological toxicity, effectively reveals the fantasy of endless possibility attached to endless resources—the dream of petroleum at the midcentury—as nothing less than calamitous folly. Still, *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* set a precedent for later road narratives. Even as the American driver evolves in response to shifting national and global circumstances, the Bohemian figure in *On The Road* remains an enduring American archetype into our present day. For me, this phenomenon evokes a major question: Why does the postwar road narrative continue to attract so many participants, even as midcentury road texts foreground the volatility of oil capitalism? The road itself, in many ways, transcends the limitations of material and cultural boundaries. It is a particularly productive modern space, one where the material and the imaginative intersect, where reality and fantasy overlap. Both *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* offer cautionary tales for contemporary readers: the road can be *both* a space of infinite potential *and* the central material foundation of petro-modernity—within the human mind. To this point, both texts reveal how influential materiality is in shaping our perceptions of and relationships with the world the we inhabit. The maps of petroculture have become the maps of American life. Working to remap the individual or nation requires a different set of maps—or at least a different approach to mapping. Most importantly, both texts convey the importance of approaching change as *more* than an individual venture, as an acknowledgment of the vast ecological web that exists within and outside of the self.

CHAPTER II.

PETROANXIETY AND OIL SCARCITY: SEVENTIES PETROCULTURES IN FILM, MUSIC, AND LITERATURE

“Try not to think so much about
The truly staggering amount of oil that it takes to make a record
All the shipping, the vinyl, the cellophane lining, the high gloss
The tape and the gear”
—Father John Misty, “Now I’m Learning to Love the War”

Born to Run

Initially, the opening of Bruce Springsteen’s 1975 album *Born to Run* breaks stride with previous records: both “Blinded by the Light” off *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* (1973) and “The E Street Shuffle” from *The Wild, The Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* show off Springsteen’s wide musicality, harmonious compositions that feature his signature play between driving guitar and soaring saxophone. In *Born to Run*’s “Thunder Road,” flighty piano backs what Springsteen terms an “early-morning harmonica,” setting a tone for the record that is both wistful and expectant (220). The implication of this very simple beginning is that *Born to Run* will not deliver exactly what listeners had come to expect from Springsteen. In fact, those expectations—not just “the bombastic big rock sound, the Jersey-Pavarotti-via-Roy-Orbison singing,” but the innocent optimism in American freedom that so often screams of escapism—seem to be the album’s primary conflict (222). In *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet*, Donald Deardorff claims *Born to Run* exemplifies a “deep longing for fulfillment,” that,

in fact, the album “breathed life into the fading mythos” of the American dream (23-24). However, where Deardorff mistakenly identifies “innocence and romance,” we might more aptly observe trial and perseverance (43). Beginning with “Thunder Road,” *Born to Run* is not a celebration of individual opportunity: it is an indictment of freedom myths. In his autobiography, Springsteen writes that *Born to Run* is “where I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom; from here on in, it was going to be a lot more complicated” (222). While “Thunder Road” later reaches those levels of raucous E Street Band sound, the early measures signal a change in Springsteen’s scope. The opening harmonica—a cheap, portable instrument that comes to symbolize western wanderlust—introduces the music and widens the Springsteen’s geography. While “Thunder Road” begins in Springsteen’s familiar New Jersey, the road out indicates a national scope, a movement later albums such as *Darkness at the Edge of Town* and *Nebraska* continue. Springsteen acknowledges a wider America and a wider audience—and, through that, a more genuine experience.

On the surface, “Thunder Road” implies one only needs a car and the right attitude to transform one’s life; however, attaching oneself to the car and its symbols requires sacrifices with resounding consequences—even more predominantly for women than men. The song follows an unnamed speaker and Mary, a young couple looking for a change, for new experiences. Springsteen sees this pair as the central characters of the album, “the beginnings of characters whose lives I would trace in my work... for the next four decades” (220-221). Scared that “maybe we ain’t that young anymore,” the speaker tells Mary to take his hand, to stop spending summers “praying in vain for a savior to rise from these streets.” The speaker offers his car as salvation, himself as Mary’s liberator—already subject to gendered power—but he is just as scared. He cannot take off down Thunder Road alone; he *needs* Mary. He “ain’t no hero,” he

cannot magically change her circumstances, but he does not want to be one more boy Mary has “sent away.” He wants to win where other boys have lost, to act the driver where others have crashed. What he can offer Mary is his car. Though the one instrument that supposedly symbolizes their hope for freedom and new life, the speaker’s car is a byproduct of their confinement and a symbol of their desperation. Their last ditch effort, “one last chance to make it real,” rests upon them first sacrificing their angels wings in exchange for wheels, ending any hope of transcending their material reality: “To trade in these wings on some wheels/Climb in back, Heaven’s waiting on down the tracks.” They cannot be angels. They are left to pursue paradise with the wrong tools. Rather, the speaker proposes they ride into the night “to case the promised land,” thieves eyeing what the world cannot provide them. “All the redemption I can offer,” the speaker explains, “lies beneath this dirty hood.” What they were promised is unattainable. All the speaker can offer is inadequate: the car (a poor imitation of her dream), himself, and the chance to leave a “town full of losers.” Mary has waited for that transcendent moment, but, like Prometheus, is left stealing from the gods. When the speaker tells her “the doors are open but the ride ain’t free,” they implicitly acknowledge that giving in to this pursuit means leaving behind true redemption, and, as Springsteen did, their own adolescent notions of love and freedom. For Mary, the sacrifice means leaving behind her hopes and dreams: her home, her graduation gown, and other men. For the speaker, the sacrifice is less drastic: he, too, gives up the hope of redemption, but it’s Mary he really wants. What each respectively abandons is unbalanced, particularly considering that the speaker can only offer the unknown as a future, asking Mary, instead, to “show a little faith.” Whatever Mary wants *specifically*, the speaker can only offer generalities. The geography furthers this: though the song begins on a “dusty beach road” in New Jersey, Thunder Road leads out and away, not only to the rest of the nation but to

somewhere that is *not* where they begin. “These two lanes will take us anywhere,” the speaker says, but in truth he does not know where they will go. The music crescendos as the pair get closer to dusting that old porch, ultimately fading out as the car presumably speeds away. The speaker and Mary assume the road will take care of the rest, that leaving town was the most difficult step. But they cannot be angels, and Thunder Road seems to lead anywhere but heaven.

Rather than the road being a place of transcendental potential, the road for Springsteen represents an aesthetic dream: a beautiful fantasy characters pursue as *fantasy*. In reality, the road perpetuates narratives of class and gendered inequality, masking imbalance with promises of freedom and enlightenment. “Thunder Road” engages escapism without destination and the pleasure of experience, all while acknowledging the controlled and plotted purposefulness of road networks. In a brief study, Brent Bellamy notes Springsteen’s characters are markers for such pursuits, namely that “individualism and the road do not lead to salvation,” a narrative “played out on the bodies” within *Darkness at the Edge of Town*. While I agree with this assessment, I think this is something those very characters have already realized. In contrast to Kerouac’s characters, Springsteen understands the myth of transcendence. Further, he depicts a history that at once acknowledges myths of heroic individualism on the road (myths shown to be failing long before the 1970s) and realizes the distinct draw of the road narrative in spite of such failures. Using Springsteen’s recognition as a point of entry, I propose we observe where and how narratives of freedom and individualism shift in the 1970s. The 1970s signal the end of postwar oil exuberance and usher in new forms of environmental awareness as a result of oil scarcity and pollution. Further, the decades marks a shifting affect of automobility, wherein petroanxiety and conceptions of the American driver shape and reshape human interiority. Of particular interest are gendered depictions of driving in art and culture—most notably film—that

distinguish American roadways as *the* space to reestablish gendered hierarchies. Even as Americans recognize oil as a far more volatile national foundation than perceived at the midcentury, a large body of work spanning popular film, B-level trucker movies, music, and literature acts to subtly (re)stabilize petroculture by returning to 1950s postwar consumption and gender norms. The juncture of oil, gender, and film in the 1970s presents opportunities to map petroculture in ways that offer an alternative perspective on the environmental and cultural impacts of postwar petroleum dependencies. Ultimately, this allows us to examine new narratives as to how and why oil has become inseparable from American culture, narratives that can, in our present moment, help to rethink and reshape contemporary forms of consumption.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examine the effects of midcentury speed and petroanxiety on the road fueled by postwar oil surplus. Midcentury oil exuberance invited optimistic imaginative individual possibilities; yet, as we see in *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Beatnik and Hippie countercultures were fundamentally undermined by mid-century US dependence on corporate oil. By the 1970s, oil's iridescent sheen began to fade, replaced by a murkier, vacuous reality of scarcity and collapse (Buell, 82). The decade is marred by national and global crises that, in many ways, signaled the end of unmitigated, postwar exuberance. American road narratives are faced with competing evolutions in American automobility: road stories mired in 1950s nostalgia, gender crises rooted in petroanxiety, and material struggles over the future of global oil with national and geopolitical consequences. Few 1970s road narratives retain Kerouac's degree of optimism; rather, we see the road narrative radically altered, reshaped in reaction to the sociocultural changes of the 1960s, national pollution, and the economic

exigencies of the cartel era in global petroculture. In this chapter, I will briefly examine how oil scarcity reorients national perceptions of petro-modernity. We observe the roots of petroanxiety as early as the late-1940s; however, Americans become acutely aware of their relationship to and consumption of oil as petroanxiety accelerates in reaction to scarcity. I start with George Lucas' film *American Graffiti*, which covers three distinct decades of road culture spanning the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The film anticipates the decade's energy crises: material and cultural disruptions that interrupt notions of American exceptionalism. More importantly, *American Graffiti* presciently observes the road as an increasingly hypermasculine space; the loss of midcentury "easy oil" resonates throughout gender politics. I argue that cultural capital throughout the 1970s—from car chase films, literary depictions of divorce and separation, even trucker songs—appropriated the road as a space to project idealized versions of white masculinity based primarily in 1950s suburban nostalgia. 1960s identity politics and the material vacuum left in the wake of oil upset earlier postwar masculine archetypes; those losing power (primarily white American men) were portrayed as experiencing feelings of unrest and inadequacy on the screen and on the page. 1970s film, in particular, equates masculinity with the heroic outlaw and deviant driver. Not only are these masculinities a version of nostalgia based on misrepresentation, but they form in reaction to imposed limitations. I critique a deepening connection between these versions of masculinity, the road, and mounting environmental awareness, with specific attention to the way cinema seizes cars and driving to (re)construct reckless masculinities displaced by active feminisms, economic recession, and resource scarcity. Ultimately, these works attempt to reestablish a postwar status quo wherein consumption of natural resources, associated with a specific kind of gendered agency, can exist beyond the perceived limitations of environmental, social, or even global politics. Here, the frontier ethic of

heroic individualism clashes with the realities of scarcity. This struggle becomes the driving force of the 1970s road narrative. Last, I examine Raymond Carver's short story "What Is It?" in order to draw together oil, gender, and environment amidst the crumbling suburban nuclear family. Carver's depictions of hopelessness and inaction are emblematic of shifting American (auto)mobility in the 1970s: though there is some effort to reclaim the road as a space for transformative potential, "What Is It?" conveys the national undercurrent of petroanxiety that comes to dominate human interiority throughout the decade. These two crises—the disruption of American masculinity and the disruption of American exceptionalism through resource consumption—may seem at first disconnected, as the former is primarily a matter of social politics, the latter of global economic realities. I see these as vitally connected, however, concurrent ruptures that not only draw masculinity and energy politics together but portray the road as the primary stage gender, class, and environmental conflicts throughout the 1970s.

From Exuberance to Scarcity

Daniel Yergin notes that the late-1960s and early-1970s were "watershed years for the domestic U.S. oil industry" (549). Yergin states that, "by 1973, oil had become the lifeblood of the world's industrial economies, and it was being pumped and circulated with very little to spare" (570). The U.S. required increasing volumes of oil annually to construct new interstate highways and sustain suburbanization. Likewise, extreme competition in the automotive industry propelled Americans increasing reliance on personal automobility. After nearly a twenty-year oil surplus, "demand was catching up to available supply," causing the U.S. to increase oil imports from the Middle East by vast quantities (549-551). Between just 1970 and 1973, oil imports nearly doubled; the "security surplus of oil" Americans had taken for granted for 50-plus years

had dried up (Yeomans, 23). Dependence on foreign oil (and in part a consequence of resource wars throughout the Cold War) sparked increased U.S. presence in global oil regions, particularly the Middle East. However, “political recession” in Britain and the U.S. during the late-1960s allowed Middle Eastern oil producers (particularly Iran) previously unprecedented control over exports—a powerful political “oil weapon” (Yergin, 547).⁵⁹ The OPEC oil embargo in 1973, the realization of the “oil weapon” and *the* defining moment for American oil and energy cultures in 1970s, “came as a surprise and a shock,” but it is clear that political and economic tensions had been building towards this moment for more than two decades (570). Even as Americans continued to benefit from cheap oil, domestic oil security was always and already volatile.

While the effects of the embargo were revelatory in terms of global politics, the effects on domestic consumer culture were equally disruptive. Most notably, oil scarcity called into question the patterns of unbridled natural resource use that made postwar suburban life possible. The concept of scarcity, which took on new meaning throughout the decade, was tantamount to impotence and inadequacy. The 1973 OPEC embargo made two things clear: first, the extent to which America relied upon oil both economically and socially; and second, that oil was not endlessly abundant. “The embargo signaled a new era for world oil,” Yergin writes, particularly within the United States—OPEC’s major target (595). Gasoline prices skyrocketed, as well as costs for almost all commercial and industrial products—essentially all commerce within 1970s oil-petrochemical-capitalism had come to depend upon petroleum in both the creation and distribution of commodity. Scarcity forced Americans into a new recognition of/relationship to petroleum. The petroleum infrastructure, LeMenager notes, has shaped the modern human’s life:

⁵⁹ The “oil weapon” had been spoken about between Middle Eastern nations since the 1950s as a way of dealing with the newly created Israeli state (Yergin, 1975).

their habits, daily routines, even “embodied memory” (104). The embargo, in essence, disrupted routine. LeMenager terms the loss of easy oil “petromeloncholia”: grieving, a response to loss that “refuses to acknowledge that conventional oil is running out” (104). This prevents “passage forward,” a way of realizing oneself outside of petroinfrastructures. Though LeMenager speaks specifically to the era of Tough Oil, I think it is possible to extend her analysis of petromeloncholia to the 1970s. Scarcity in the 1970s represents a major shift in daily practices that had evolved in response to oil surplus. These changes were often radical: gas stations with no fuel, grocery stores missing consumer goods, industries losing jobs, families facing financial hardships, romantic partnerships questioned or abandoned. The 1970s, possibly the end of the American Century, closed as a “decade of economic limits, rather than opportunity” (Merrill, vii). The mind often resists such rapid, fundamental change; in so doing, we are prone to sentimentalize the past.⁶⁰

Part of my argument is that petroanxieties realized by oil scarcity are not entirely new, but take on different meaning as the awareness of that scarcity heightens. We witness these new/different meanings on the road. At first glance, *American Graffiti* seems a simple road narrative: the film follows teens as they cruise the streets of Modesto, California on a Friday night. The film depicts postwar oil exuberance through the celebration of early-1960s youth culture: wholesome, adventurous, and with little significant consequence for one’s actions. However, what makes *American Graffiti* particularly interesting amongst 1970s car films is that

⁶⁰ Here, LeMenager engages portions of Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory. She describes the meeting of different agents within an ecosystem as “feeling ecological.” Of particular note is her claim that when agents “mingle,” the result is not always pleasant: “Of course Latour’s sort of ecological thinking, where humans mingle and are perhaps invaded by other ‘agents,’ does not necessarily feel good to the ordinary people enmeshed in these events. Feeling ecological need not be pleasant” (105). Nostalgia is a way of (re)imagining that meeting as pleasant, where the human agent exists outside realities of danger, risk, or discomfort. Nostalgia denies other ecological actors the trajectory or vitality that might compel humans to self-examination or change.

it engages three distinct decades of American automobility: the early 1960s, when the film takes place; the 1950s, which exists as the film's nostalgic past; and the 1970s, when the film was released amidst the scarcity that countered previous decades of oil surplus. These three decades mark divergent trajectories not only for nationalisms and personal freedoms epitomized in postwar excess and evolving mobilities but also for efforts to restructure national identity through the act of driving. Though gilded in the façade of 1962, *American Graffiti* manages to engage both trajectories across three decades. On the surface, the film's romantic tendencies appear to mask the material consequences of oil scarcity, opting instead to venerate "easy oil" postwar petroculture. The narrative of heroic individualism tied to driving is meant to overshadow growing knowledge of pollution and suspend apprehension of scarcity. The effects of memory and nostalgia border on petromelancholy, where the film becomes a memento of a less complicated age of unconflicted resource consumption. The road is a space for individual exploration, where one can signal their identity to other teens (other drivers). On weekend nights, the cruising Strip in Modesto becomes a stage: it presents not only the driver's car but the driver as well.⁶¹ Amy Best explains that cars are "indicators of social and economic worth" but act ultimately as indicators of individual identity (4). Similarly, Jack DeWitt notes, "Each car is an extension of its driver that reveals key aspects of character—because in teen culture you are what you drive" (DeWitt). Cruising presents the driver with an imagined community defined by its own set of guidelines (cruising is a way for youth to display unique portions of their personality: their sexuality, their daring, their class position, or any number of other character traits). Self-identification remains a dominant narrative of petroculture throughout the film: one is defined by

⁶¹ The impetus to judge the driver by the car is nothing new: once car culture evolved beyond the Model T a person's car could speak volumes about his or her class, style, desire, even political affiliation. Flash forward to the cars that populate *American Graffiti* and this is even more evident in youth culture.

one's car and one's ability to drive. These kinds of critiques, however, simplify the film and miss the undercurrent of petroanxiety that runs throughout it. Sentimentality in *American Graffiti* functions as a veneer over a more critical examination of identity and energy; moments within the film already hint at the unsustainability of postwar appetites and therein the material, ecological consequences of oil culture. In other words, the film subtly criticizes the impulse to sentimentalize an earlier era. Further, it exposes why these reshaped memories hold sway within the American psyche. *American Graffiti* predates Springsteen's *Born To Run* by two years, yet the film struggles with many of the same cultural and political developments: the energy crisis, the growth of American highways, the muscle car and Detroit's symbolic position nationally, and the political activism surrounding identity politics—particularly amongst youth culture.⁶²

I view *American Graffiti* as a “chase” film, though admittedly as a rearrangement of the genre which I will address later in the chapter. “Chase” symbolizes the pursuit of various personal identifiers in *American Graffiti*. Pursuit drives the narrative: each of the main characters is chasing something—validation, popularity, a woman—and views his mobility as determinative of his ability to claim that desire. Toad (Charles Martin Smith)—the resident nerd—doesn't own a car; when Steve (Ron Howard) lends Toad his '58 Chevy for the night, his self-identification transforms. No longer limited to the parking lot at Mel's Drive-In, Toad cruises Modesto in a mode of self-exploration. The film's central character, Curt (Richard Dreyfus), owns a small, foreign car which he parks at the beginning of the film, preferring to cruise with others (this foregrounds Curt's displacement or uncertainty within the normative American suburban narrative). He hops from car to car, more along for the ride than looking to get somewhere. His position as a passenger, rather than driver, reflects his own uncertainties

⁶² Though *American Graffiti* predates the OPEC embargo (though the first only by months), we know that anxiety over oil was part of political and cultural rhetoric leading into the 1970s.

about his future—the next morning he is supposed to leave for college in Chicago but has reservations about leaving his friends and the comforts of Modesto. Likewise, his ambiguity affects his ability to pursue his desire—in this case, a young blonde woman in a '56 Thunderbird. Each individual's narrative is more broadly directed by patterns of access and control, ideas Duffy outlines extensively. Specifically, Duffy explains that “speed politics” determine how drivers are directed and managed, or how each character accesses resources and pleasures (Duffy, 7). Toad, Steve, and Curt, each shaped by postwar American oil exuberance, imagine limitless possibility on the road. In fact, the American teenager, as a historical and social phenomenon, is a product of the petroleum infrastructure, meant to sustain petro-commerce but also to magnify it. When the Strip is too small, they simply expand outward because they are easily able to—because “easy oil” makes it easy to do so. Each character's pursuit is unending (the vignettes only come to some conclusion in a small afterward at the end of the film), each desire leading to new desires, each road leading to new roads (or new experiences of the same stretch of road). In *American Graffiti*, “chase” amounts to the pursuit of a constant, stable identity.

This is to say the film is not so much a celebration of a perfect 1960s moment, but rather a commentary on fleeting notions of constancy. The film is laced with dissatisfaction, no matter what car or road one ascribes to. No one in the film exhibits this awareness more clearly than John (Paul LeMat), the rebellious greaser with a heart of gold. Early in *American Graffiti*, John laments, “The whole strip is shrinking. Oh, I remember about five years ago it would take a couple of hours and a tank full of gas just to make one circuit. It was really something.” From his very first lines, John—who is *the* embodiment of cool in the film—is anxious about limited opportunities. John dresses like a 50s greaser in tight blue jeans and a white t-shirt with

cigarettes packed in the sleeve. He “hates that surfer sound” that was taking over pop music in southern California by 1962, the year the Beach Boys released their first LP, *Surfin’ Safari*. He drives a 1932 Ford Deuce Coup that has been souped up; everyone in the Valley recognizes his car and knows how fast it is. Despite his rebellious appearance—racing illegally or refusing to pay minor traffic tickets—the greaser-*Rebel Without a Cause* counterculture John represents already exists largely in the past. Though only 21 or 22 years old, he wishes for “the good ole days.” He is defined by his car and his ability to race. He did not fight in the Korean War and will not fight in Vietnam.⁶³ His entire life has been shaped by postwar oil exuberance (Buell, 71). And the threat of losing that identity looms ominously in his rear-view mirror.

Viewers celebrate John’s coolness, his ability as a driver, how he is seemingly able to move and act of his own free will. And while one might initially envy that smoothness, John struggles with his social position. He cannot go to college and thus feels tied to Modesto permanently; his already younger friends are moving on, leaving him to foster new relationships with increasingly younger individuals. The escapism of “Thunder Road” is not an option for John. Perhaps most pressing is the stress of racing. John’s identity is constructed around his prowess as a driver. Can he—as he ages, as the competition stays young, as the cars get newer and faster—continue to win races? What happens when he finally loses? At one point in John’s youth, the power of oil seemed illimitable and the world seemed equally big. As he is confronted by the fragility of his identity, the world shrinks—the Strip shrinks. Again, I think the impulse is to see this film as a teen utopia; however, John is no longer a teenager. He slowly becomes aware of his limitations, his place adjacent to suburban utopia. Yet he keeps racing, as if suffering from the same oil addictions Dean exhibits in *On The Road*.

⁶³ This is made clear in the film’s epilogue.

Where *American Graffiti* falls prey to romanticization is in the cruising itself. Long shots of polished cars reflect the bright neon signs that light the Strip. Teens jump between cars at stop lights, then yell and laugh at each other as they cruise parallel down the strip. These shots hearken to the illimitable possibilities of midcentury oil. By simply occupying a beautiful '58 Chevy, Toad transforms from lonely nerd to capable socialite. For perhaps the first time in his life, Toad attracts the attention of a woman, Debbie (Candy Clark). Without the car, it is highly unlikely Toad would be of notice to anyone. Snippets of other teens on the Strip throughout the film give viewers similar impressions about their opportunities and futures. But the film foregrounds this romanticism against a more wary, grounded skepticism. Curt's unremarkable foreign car acts as an important counter to the impressive, American-made vehicles that otherwise populate the film. Compared to Steve's '58 Chevy or John's Deuce Coup, Curt's car is meant to be comical. That Curt parks the car in the opening scenes and does not drive the car again until the very end of the film speaks volumes about what the car signifies versus the identity Curt would *like* to assume. Curt would rather be defined as a back-seat character in a cruiser than as a driver of something less. This further reflects parts of Curt's narrative struggle—whether or not he should leave Modesto and go to college or stick around with his friends in an environment where he is more comfortable—and the indecision of early-60s teens who, occupying a moment of great transition, did not want to be suburban adults but weren't quite sure how *not* to be. Knowing he is supposed to fly to Chicago the next morning, Curt spends the whole night out cruising. He would rather chase his ideal woman, a sort of cinematic unicorn (she only appears for 20 seconds) driving a beautiful pearl-white Thunderbird, than confront impending real-life decisions. When he resignedly starts his own car at the end of the evening, driving home and later to the airport en route to college, it seems Curt has come to a

realization that no one else in the film quite reaches: that those markers of identity attached to impermanent commodities harbor the same volatility as the material that powers them.

Indeed, youth culture is really what grounds the film: just as 1962 symbolizes a transition between the 1950s and the 1970s, the late teenage years signal the transition into adulthood. The focus on early-1960s suburban youth potentially separates cultural critique within the film from national politics; however, youth culture becomes the film's way of acknowledging shifting racial, gender, and environmental narratives that occur concurrent to the white middle-class suburban fantasy. Howlin' Jack, the secret DJ playing in the background of almost every cruising scene, represents both the racial tensions and social reforms of the Civil Rights Movements and Hippie countercultures. Not only is Howlin' Jack black, but he plays rock and roll. He is the soundtrack of suburban youth, acknowledging their dissatisfaction with the racial and artistic standards of earlier generations. Most importantly, that Howlin' Jack's broadcast exists in the background suggests: first, the American teenager's implicit trajectory towards 1960s countercultures; and second, that despite the work of Civil Rights activists, Howlin' Jack is still subject to racial injustice. In consuming Howlin' Jack's broadcast, American youth is part of those reforms, even if their participation occurs from a place of unrecognized privileged.

At the same time, petroculture is what provides access to those broadcasts: their participation in reform is made possible by—and monitored through—oil surplus and economic excess. Teens are able to listen to Howlin' Jack because of their car radios. Beyond simply the glamorous cars teens drive throughout Modesto, oil infiltrates many less obvious facets of the film: Mel's, the drive-in that acts as a central hub throughout, can only be conceptualized once cars become ubiquitous; the records Howlin' Jack broadcasts are made of plasticized polymers,

petroleum derivatives; the Strip itself, the heart of downtown Modesto, is a four-lane road lined by banks, gas stations, and businesses selling the necessities for proper suburban homes. And yet, despite these settings, the instability of teen identity reflects the instability of the petro-modernity they inhabit. After the gas shortages, economic and environmental crises, and economic recession post-1973, the material volatility of oil became all too clear to many Americans. The emergence of environmental activism on a national scale is perhaps the clearest realization of petroanxiety during the early years of the decade: petro-modernity's consumer anxieties have *bodily, tangible* consequences. The nostalgia in *American Graffiti* is less a romanticization of a period and more a critique of the American's realization of petroculture itself.

The anxieties that characters such as Curt and John express within the film signal to a deeper fear concerning life and petro-modernity's way of life as humans recognize their impact upon natural environments. As Buell notes, oil catastrophe on the heels of exuberance is far more "insistent" in the late 60s and 70s (82). That environmentalism emerges as a national movement in the 1970s is a testament to catastrophe's insistence throughout the decade. Viewed concurrently with escalating Cold War tensions, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the increasingly violent anti-war movement, environmental anxieties are, in truth, anxieties about impermanence—the tenuousness position of the human on a planetary scale. Changes in modern media and visibility had an immense impact in nationalizing activism. Seeing pollution or viewing environmental disaster made human impact on the environment immediate. Televised environmental disasters sparked increasing environmental activism in the late 60s and 70s. Visual media prompted Americans beyond immediately-affected local and regional areas to recognize their own historical complicity in those disasters. As LeMenager explains, *seeing* and

witnessing the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill transformed national response to the disaster. The visual representation evoked an emotional response that compelled viewers (LeMenager, 51-56).⁶⁴ Likewise, images of the Cuyahoga River aflame in 1969 conveyed the environmental consequences of industrial waste on a national scale, specifically oil-petrochemical waste.⁶⁵ In the earliest phases of petroleum discovery, John Rockefeller placed a number of his oil refineries in and around the Cleveland area (Yergen, 20-21). Much of the industry in the Erie region refined oil into products used nationally (kerosene, solvents, degreasers, and eventually gasoline). Even if one resided outside the Erie region, using gas to power one's car meant one contributed to the Cuyahoga disaster itself. Recognizing oil production and consumption as intrinsic to pollution realizes a larger web of ecological contact with other actors that inhabit those spaces.⁶⁶

The emotional and affective response to the 1970s pollution epidemic manifest as personal health concerns but later grow into species-level apprehensions. Frederick Buell notes the "fear of environmental self-destruction that came with the 1970s environmental crisis, an apocalypse that involved oil, in many ways beyond Carson's carcinogenic and ecocidal toxics" (82).⁶⁷ The looming energy crises countered a long history of American exceptionalism built on

⁶⁴ For instance, images of wildlife covered in oil evoked strong responses, as did coverage of cleanup efforts (LeMenager, 51-56). This remains true to this day, though perhaps the most iconic example of such is otters and birds soaked in oil after the Exxon *Valdez* spill or, later, pelicans drowning in crude after *Deepwater Horizon*.

⁶⁵ The river disaster also occurred in 1969., though the river had been heavily polluted for years and had, in fact, caught fire 13 times before.

⁶⁶ I would also note briefly note the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970 conveys unprecedented levels of pollution affecting the health of Americans throughout the nation. One of the agency's first major projects, *Documerica*, amassed photographs of 1970s America as a way of recording the state of the environment nationally. Again, appealing to visuality, the EPA hoped to institute better environmental regulations, therein improving American health and well-being. Years later, the EPA intended to use photos from the 1970s to show those improvements; if nothing else, the project politically acknowledged environmental conditions that were so awful they were worthy of documentation.

⁶⁷ This heavily refers back to some of Rachel Carson's work, who worked to uncover some of the less visible forms of pollution that affect humans and ecosystems. However, by the 1970s, air pollution particularly had

the myth of unending resources.⁶⁸ Though neither Curt nor John expresses as much outright, *American Graffiti* as a film articulates subtle trepidation from its vantage point in 1972; the neon Drive-In utopia is as much a fantasy as the period the film memorializes. The carefree aura of the exuberant 50s and early 60s is as much a product of cultural memory as identity is a product of commodity culture. If the 1950s that John remembers have disappeared by 1962, 1970s viewers are acutely aware that the culture romanticized in *American Graffiti* is also long gone—in the absence of oil exuberance, viewers are left only with residual petroanxiety. Shifting identity, particularly for Curt and John, cannot help but mirror the instability of three decades of shifting petroculture. Likewise, the film's highpoint (Bob Falga's crash) parallels Buell's petroleum trajectory: exuberance is always eventually countered with catastrophe. If the film begins with hopeful optimism, it must end in a spectacular collision.

Bob Falga is from the farmland outside of Modesto. He appears for brief moments throughout the film, antagonizing John to race him. Falga looms over the film, a sort of accelerated apparition that John feels obligated to confront. John's entire persona is constructed around his car and prowess as a driver. John's reluctance to race Falga reveals the paradox he is subject to: as a driver, John must race (and win) to maintain his identity, but each race could end defeat and thus the complete destabilization of self. The drag race is the climax of the film, despite occupying less than two minutes screen time.⁶⁹ John and Falga meet on Paradise Road—a long stretch of flat, straight highway outside of the city—John's Deuce Coup parallel with

become so bad in urban centers that there was no denying the presence of pollutants from industrial technologies.

⁶⁸ This 'myth' reaches back to the frontier, the American West once thought of as the American garden, only waiting for cultivation; and even further, back to the idea of the New World, drawing Europeans over the Atlantic in hopes of a new continent filled with unending riches—or more accurately, unending resources transformed into capital.

⁶⁹ Unlike the exhaustive 40-minute car chase in 1974's *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, the comedic chase-crash sequence in 1980's *The Blue Brothers*, or the revolutionary chase in *Bullitt*, there is a sense of realism here.

Falfa's 1955 Chevy. The two size each other up, then gun their engines for a few brief seconds before screeching down the road. Moments later, Falfa's car careens into the ditch, rolling spectacularly before settling in a nearby field. This moment should reify John's persona: not only does he win another race, but he beats Falfa who has attempted to out-man him all movie. For his friends and the other onlookers, the victory certainly functions that way: it proves John's cool, it confirms his capabilities as a driver and a man beyond a doubt. For John, however, the victory realizes anxieties he has attempted to repress. "I was losing, man," he tells Toad, "He had me man, he was pulling away from me just before he crashed." If not on that Friday night, John knows that someday he will lose.

Falfa walks away unharmed, but the Chevy catches fire, totaling the car. In a split second, Falfa loses all credibility—the same split second that oil becomes spectacle, erupting into the film's visual and narrative foreground. As oil flares into significance, Falfa's significance dims. He is unable to save his car—as the Chevy recedes from view, Falfa recedes from the film. The toughness and intimidation Falfa exude throughout the film is snuffed out. Though Toad praises the win—"You'll always be number one, John, you're the greatest!"—John seems more skeptical. There's no celebration, any exhilaration is purely chemical, a product of adrenaline brought on by the crash. "He's fast, sure," John says, "but he's stupid." In that moment, there is some level of self-recognition. As John watches Falfa's Chevy burn, he recognizes the instability of his own identity, an instability mirrored in the material and cultural volatility of oil.

American Graffiti certainly acknowledges freedom myths that dominate earlier road narratives while similarly recognizing that promises of free movement and mobility tied to the driver figure have always been countered by the fear of "running out": running out of gas,

running out of road, or running out of time.⁷⁰ Ultimately, viewers are supposed to recognize the Strip as a fiction. Even the noticeably homogenous white cast is part of the idealization the film subtly counters. The actual Modesto of 1962 had as many chicano/chicana cruisers as white cruisers; Best notes that central California cruising culture was a unique space of racial contact (Best, 197). That the film lacks Latino cruisers is one indication of its fictionality. Further, its quasi-vignette style makes it difficult to grasp the entirety of any one storyline. Considering first, the difficulty of tracing oil culturally, and second, sociocultural ruptures that reframe and rewrite the myth of American heroic individualism, we are left with a series of scattered stories that are unmappable and incomplete. The only conclusion the film offers is an epilogue where we learn that John dies three years later, killed by a drunk driver. His friend Toad is drafted into Vietnam, where he too dies. In essence, the epilogue gets at the real conflict in the movie: the impulse to romanticize, nostalgize, or celebrate the American driver versus the reality of that figure as appropriative and ephemeral—the epitome of consumption out of control.

Darkness at the Edge of Town

Springsteen's next album, 1978's *Darkness at the Edge of Town*, is darker, grittier, the adult successor to *Born to Run*. Plagued by business conflicts, troubling childhood memories, and worries about the stability of his band, Springsteen seems in the proverbial shit—a tone that casts a pall over much of the album. But is an admittedly more mature sound, “somewhere between *Born to Run*'s spiritual hopefulness and seventies cynicism” (Springsteen, 262).

Springsteen describes *Born to Run* as a “personal battle;” *Darkness at the Edge of Town* enters

⁷⁰ Whether a turtle crossing a new road in *Grapes of Wrath* or *Rebel Without a Cause* ending in that moment where the pursuit of speed outreaches the capacities of the machine and the human body.

the “collective war,” a music that “could contain” the “political implications” of the characters he portrays (266). “By 1977,” Springsteen writes:

In true American fashion, I’d escaped the shackles of birth, personal history, and, finally, place, but something wasn’t right. Rather than exhilaration, I felt unease. I sensed there was a great difference between unfettered personal license and real freedom. Many of the groups that had come before us, many of my heroes, had mistaken one for the other and it’d ended in poor form. I felt personal license was to freedom as masturbation was to sex. It’s not bad, but it’s not the real deal. (262)

Springsteen recognizes that the freedom mythos that Mary and the unnamed speaker in “Thunder Road” subscribe to *as* mythology: as fantastical and attractive, but not real, not tangible. The optimistic youthful characters in *Born to Run* became “older, weathered, [and] wiser” characters in *Darkness at the Edge of Town*. As daily struggles throughout the decade became harder to bear, Springsteen “steered away from escapism,” opting instead to engage the realities of American life (263).

“Badlands,” the opening track of Springsteen’s 1978 album *Darkness at the Edge of Town*,” acts almost as a perfect sequel to “Thunder Road.” “Badlands” begins *in media res*, drums picking up where “Thunder Road” fades out, piano backed by a wall of guitars. Right away, we sense conflict as the speaker desperately seeks stability. “Honey, I want the heart, I want the soul,” he sings, “I want control right now./You better listen to me, baby.” The hopefulness and “control” the speaker assumed in “Thunder Road” are entirely gone. He grasps at some semblance of security, demanding notice from whomever might be listening. Deardorff once again reads hopefulness, implying that the song’s conclusion in its invocation of love, hope, and faith someday might raise the speaker “above these badlands” (51). Here, Deardorff

mistakes the “badlands” as an existential temperament, when the “badlands” are *real* places. This is where “Thunder Road” leads: to the Badlands, a troubled Heartland where men and women work long, hard hours but feel unsatisfied. I see the speaker’s plea as a product of material realities, the consequences of scarcity and recession that Springsteen explicitly states are inescapable. The speaker is “caught in a cross-fire” he does not “understand.” He is subject to and shaped by inconceivable material exigencies that have distinct impact upon body and mind: “Workin’ in the fields/Till you get your back burned/Workin’ ‘neath the wheel/Till you get your facts learned.” “Love, hope, and faith” do not change one’s material realities; they only act to further obfuscate American freedom myths that keep the consumer embedded within oil-petrochemical-capitalism. In the Badlands, the facts you get learned are, “Poor man wanna be rich/Rich man wanna be king/And a king ain't satisfied/'Til he rules everything” (Springsteen). And here, there is no escape: in the “Badlands, you gotta live it everyday.”

This is a depressing rendering of seventies America. But, there is something comforting, even brave, in Springsteen’s attempt to face national realities head on, rather than continue driving down the fantasy road. “No one you have been and no place you have gone ever leaves you,” Springsteen writes. “The new parts of you simply jump in the car and go along for the rest of the ride. The success of your journey and your destination all depend on who’s driving” (265). Springsteen recognizes two vital functions of 1970s petroculture: First, the importance of the car and the road in shaping one’s present and future within petro-modernity. And second, the significance of the driver. The role of the driver dominates masculine seventies road films because the driver presumably controls his journey. What is notable in Springsteen’s vision, however, is that he does not claim the need to be at the wheel; in fact, what “Badlands” implies is that chasing “control” obfuscates one’s material reality.

“Truckin’ got my chips cashed in”

1970s oil scarcity evoked a range of road narratives. While some (like *American Graffiti*) acknowledged the complex portrayals of petroculture and American identity on the road, others approached the road as an extractive space where one could tap into the mythos of freedom and mobility as a counter to the vulnerabilities brought on by scarcity. Likewise, many of the latter road narratives further usurped the road as a space to counter 1960s identity politics, particularly Women’s Rights Movements. Cop dramas, trucker movies, even quasi-southern outlaw country music portrayed the road as a hypermasculine space, disobedient to authority but reclaiming what was interpreted as disrupted historical American masculinities. I contend that efforts to reclaim lost masculinity, “men’s movements,” and the “Silent Majority” are as much reactions to oil scarcity in the early-1970s as they are reactions to shifting gender ideologies. These two crises—the disruption of American masculinity and the disruption of American exceptionalism through resource consumption—may seem at first disconnected, as the former is primarily a matter of social politics, the latter of global economic realities. I see these as vitally connected, however, concurrent ruptures that not only draw masculinity and energy politics together but make the road the primary stage for attempts to reestablish gendered postwar hegemonic powers.

Challenges to postwar masculinity (particularly American white male patriarchy) in the 1960s played an important role in the decade’s activist identity politics. Yoshida Junko explains that the “sociocultural changes of the 60s were rooted in the expressed discontents of the 50s,” namely the social and gendered order embedded in the suburban nuclear family (105). Patriarchy within the suburban nuclear family contributes to what Alan Nadal terms “containment,” a

national order shaped during the 1950s in response to socialist ideologies that defined Cold War politics. “Containment culture,” Nadal explains, is:

the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined in the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture. (3)

Though there was some resistance to narratives of containment in the 1950s—we might even interpret Sal and Dean’s sociocultural resistance as a response to containment—national trends towards industrialization (converting wartime industry to commercial production), suburbanization, and global colonialism tended to undercut efforts to resist containment culture. 1960s countercultures such as the Civil Rights Movement, Environmentalism, and second-wave Feminism attacked containment—though, I would argue that petroculture and petro-infrastructures functioned as another branch of containment that directed and regulated political action unconsciously. Activists criticized domestic, social, and professional limitations, then expanded to include discussions of the body, sexuality, and cultural-political representation. Second-wave feminists, particularly, questioned the patriarchal framework of the American family, identifying power structures in the home as particularly responsible for perpetuating gendered injustices throughout the nation. In challenging structures of gendered power, feminist activists contributed to a larger effort to disrupt containment culture at large.

Often working in coalition with the anti-war and black power movements, Women’s Rights groups—such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) or the New York Radical

Women—worked towards legislation like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and toward personal liberation focused on bodily freedom and economic independence (Adam, 3). Vanessa Hall notes that “shifting gender ideologies” coincided with “economic restructuring,” urging more women into the workforce and outside of the limited boundaries of the home-space (174). By the early 1970s, women steadily branched throughout the American work force in more diverse positions and jobs. Additionally, jobs were increasingly less reliant on Armed Forces training; access to diverse job training meant a greater variety of career choices—meaning working women were no longer limited to nurses’ stations or the stenographers’ pool. Amidst growing social change, as home and work lives morphed and transformed, many men felt disjointed, aimless, or even threatened. Junko notes that by 1974, feelings of a masculinity in “crisis” garnered responses from early “men’s movements” (106).⁷¹ A culture of victimization “virulently politicized... in the 1970s” celebrated the “Silent Majority” focused on “restoring a virile white masculinity” (Hall, 177). Throughout the 70s, those challenged by the liberal notions of 1960s countercultures were left either to build a new existence within and as a part of these changes, or to clutch at an old-world nostalgia: that men were not feminine—nurturing, caring, intimate, emotional (Junko, 106)—but rather tough providers exerting physical force to shape an otherwise hostile world.⁷²

⁷¹ Junko lists: “The first National Conference on the Masculine Mystique and the first Men and Masculinity conference was held in 1974 and 1975, respectively. In 1974 Marc Feigen Fasteau’s *The Male Machine* was published, followed in 1975 by Warren Farrell’s *The Liberated Man*. The year of 1976 saw the publication of Richard Doyle’s *The Rape of the Male* and Herb Goldberg’s *The Hazards of Being Male*” (105). I would also note this kind of rhetoric culminated in 1990 with Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, which has been used by men’s movements in the 2010s. Andrew Kimbrell uses the “crisis of masculinity” extensively in his critiques of gender and masculinity.

⁷² Susan Faludi contends, “the life of the postwar father was altogether too newly out of the box for him to understand it”; thus, the postwar nuclear patriarch attached to older gendered archetypes: the cowboy, the frontiersman, and the driver. “The man controlling his environment is today the prevailing American image of masculinity,” Faludi continues. “A man is expected to prove himself not by being part of society but by being untouched by it” (10). While Faludi has been heavily criticized, I think she here touches on a very important foundation for versions of 20th century masculinities, namely that masculine energies ought to be exercised by shaping the world to a man’s desire—and to violently oppose those forces that might impede such efforts.

Radical feminist activists identified capitalism itself as the reason for sexist and misogynist practices that had become so ingrained in American industries as to be rationalized as natural traits. Men “victimized” by identity politics (who viewed shifting gender ideologies as encroaching on historically reliable white male roles) attempted to (re)construct gendered social order (Kimmel, 103). Reconstructing the gendered order of the 1950s depended highly upon reinforcing capitalist ideology in direct opposition to radical women working to disrupt capitalism. Most importantly, in spite of 1970s oil scarcity, postwar American capitalism nonetheless meant oil-petrochemical-capitalism. Thus, growing trades in the early-1970s coopted as specifically masculine industries were intricately automotive, firmly entrenched in the petroleum infrastructure—such as law enforcement or truck driving. Congress refused to uphold the EEOC as the decade unfolded, meaning the few available recession-era jobs were disparately awarded to men. Though this “men’s movement” began in the 1970s, Kimmel notes the proliferation of hypermasculinity throughout the period as oil scarcity dominated the American conscience. The Reagan administration reestablished a sense of national oil security in the 1980s through extensive geopolitical military intervention and unscrupulous environmental regulations, and in turn reestablished patriarchal hierarchies. The “mythopoetic men’s movement... often attributed to the work of [Robert] Bly and Michael Meade” conveys the restoration of toxic midcentury masculinities, the price of which was environmental *and* humanitarian toxicity (105).⁷³

⁷³ Indeed, works like *Iron John* have been much referenced throughout the 2010s by alt-right conservatives who—among extreme racial and economic views—have based much of their movement on reestablishing what they see as a lost masculinity, a weakness with modern men that can only be righted through vigorously unorganized political action. Again, my contention here is this nostalgia about the role of the modern American man is as much dependent upon the social-economic role of oil culturally as it is about gender politics.

Problems with masculinity *are* problems with oil: when oil attains a certain volatility, masculinity reveals itself to be similarly volatile. Scarcity accelerates petroanxiety, the result of a generation's petroaffect molding human interiority to the trajectory of petroleum. To (re)construct a stable gendered order reminiscent of the containment-era suburban nuclear family, oil first had to be stabilized—if not as material, then at the very least through popular perception. rather than caution or reconsideration. Thus, in spite of 1970s oil scarcity, the road remained an attractive space for (re)imagining American self-images, particularly in film media. Car chases and crashes became a staple of popular film. Increasingly spectacular portrayals of daring, valiant driving transformed the car from textual prop to integral extension of character and setting. Bo "Bandit" Darville's Pontiac Trans Am, Frank Bullitt's Ford Mustang GT, or Kowalski's Plymouth Challenger—fast cars that require skilled drivers—are as memorable in their respective films as the characters themselves.⁷⁴ While Americans focused commercially on fuel efficiency, on-screen the car existed bizarrely outside scarcity's limitations and restraints. Filmic portrayals of driving were emblematic of a certain pursuit of unimpeded selfhood, where not even material constraint can interrupt the realization of masculine road narratives. Attempts to establish driving as specifically masculine, to set the "remasculinization of America" on the road because the road is a space where men can be men, work in opposition to feminist efforts to break down gender constructs (Jeffords, 3-5). Rather than realize the consequences of scarcity, 1970s road films opted instead for a mythic American setting unencumbered by material constraints.

Trucking remains a particularly useful realization of this trend in music and film, where the realities of the industry intersect with an increasingly gendered depiction of driving.

⁷⁴ *Smokey and the Bandit*, *Bullitt*, and *Vanishing Point*, respectively

Commerce by truck increased nearly fifteen-fold over the two decades prior to the 1973 oil embargo, replacing rail and ship as the primary method of national commerce transportation in the 1960s (Caro).⁷⁵ Further, the steady construction of interstate highways made truck driving more effective, reaching all major regions of the country via one continuous road network. By committing wholly to petro-infrastructures, the U.S. likewise committed economic growth to those channels of commerce; in other words, trucking was made possible by the expansion of petro-infrastructures, but it also made those infrastructures more valuable, literally mapping America's growth throughout the late-twentieth century. The industry's growth was made possible by surplus postwar oil that kept fuel prices low and profits high. After the embargo in 1973, truck drivers went on strike to protest high gas prices (the strike was resolved by passing increased costs along to consumers). Even looking back to *On The Road* and Sal's romantic image of the outlaw trucker, we observe that the trucking industry is almost entirely male-dominated. This remained true even as the industry greatly expanded. Culturally, trucking hearkened back to a postwar white male masculinity: the lone, industrious man delivering necessary consumables, who can only depend on himself and his machine versus the long road and a ticking deadline. C.W. McCall's 1975 country hit "Convoy" perfectly encapsulates fantasies attached to trucking. Beginning with a conversation over CB radio, "Pig Pen" and "Rubber Duck" join a convoy, a long line of trucks "rocking through the night" towards various unnamed destinations (McCall). The convoy forms naturally, men hauling timber or hogs falling in behind one another for protection and camaraderie. A convoy gathers a community and allows the truck driver social outlets while driving long routes but has functional purposes as well. For

⁷⁵ Robert Caro notes the increase in trucking traffic in *The Power Broker: The Rise and Fall of New York*. After the embargo, oil prices skyrocketed and made truck driving much less profitable. Though a small percentage of women did enter the industry, we see only one female trucker in *Smokey and the Bandit*, none in *White Line Fever*.

instance, trucking convoys would sometimes use their large numbers to bypass toll roads and avoid paying the very highway fees that subsidized interstate highway construction and, therein, grew the commercial trucking industry. Rubber Duck doesn't "have a doggone dime," so rather than pay highway tolls, the convoy crashes through toll gates. The convoy grows as the song progresses; as the truckers' numbers increase, their outlaw tendencies escalate. The convoy attracts the attention of local law enforcement, but are unphased by authority: "By the time we got into Tulsa Town/We had eighty-five trucks in all/But they's a road block up on the clover leaf/And them bears was wall to wall." Rather than slowing down, submitting to searches or risking their deadline, they speed straight through "like a rocket sled on rails." The chase escalates with the National Guard called in, armored cars, tanks, and jeeps, but at this point the convoy is unstoppable: "a thousand screamin' trucks/And eleven long haired friends of Jesus/In a chartreuse microbus." They roar through all obstacles, an uncontainable force that is paradoxically reestablishing Cold War Gender norms through containment. "Convoy" depicts trucking as an exciting fellowship that is at once masculine, American, and righteous. And though it takes a gathering of trucks to withstand the forces that might police them, it is the power of the individual's intuition that justifies the drivers' warped civil disobedience.

The truck driver became an icon in pop culture through CB culture, movies, and music, where the word "truckin'" came to symbolize rock and roll labor on tour.⁷⁶ The Grateful Dead's 1970 track "Truckin'" uses the refrain to frame their industriousness, the need to keep moving: "Truckin' got my chips cashed in/Keep truckin' like the doodah man/Together, more or less in line/Just keep truckin' on" (Grateful Dead). To make their shows, they have to drive like

⁷⁶ This phrase morphed from earlier usages, mostly from Blind Boy Fuller's 1930s blues track "Truckin' My Blues Away." Though not engaging the same road movement of later songs, Blind Boy Fuller's "Keep on truckin' mama,/truckin' my blues away" implies a very similar plodding motion. To keep truckin' means to keep moving (in this case, keep pursuing a woman), to continue on.

truckers: quickly load the gear and drive unimpeded, just “pick a place to go” and “keep truckin’ on.” Hot Tuna and Eddie Kendricks each released songs titled “Keep on Truckin’” (1972 and 1973, respectively) that reflect The Grateful Dead’s usage. Like “Convoy,” these earlier tracks are meant to be a celebration of working-class American men succeeding against all odds. The Grateful Dead toured endlessly and are largely considered one of the hardest working acts in rock and roll history. At its heart, truckin’ evokes industriousness and freedom, implying intrinsic connections between capitalism and self-determination—the very opposite perception of capitalism amongst 1970s feminists. Truckin’, then, supposedly embodies American values that are meant to be admired and mimicked. One need only go as far as “Convoy” to observe as much: as the convoy rolls on unobstructed, the real Americans join the carriage (including the “longhaired friends of Jesus”). Those that oppose the convoy—the police, the National Guard—are part of a larger authoritative body that wants to regulate individual freedoms (even if those bodies are fundamental to American capitalism). In other words, the opposition interrupts free enterprise: it impedes the driver from making a wage, feeding his family, pursuing pleasure, and exercising his own agency and discretion.

Perhaps most notably, this collection of music invites *any* male listener to participate in the road narrative, whether they are on the road or not. One doesn’t have to be fluent in CB radio to be a part of Rubber Duck and Pig Pen’s caper. For example, Jerry Reed’s 1977 hit “Eastbound and Down” (featured prominently in *Smokey and the Bandit*) celebrates speed and deviancy through the act of driving itself: “East bound and down, loaded up and truckin’./We’re gonna do what they say can’t be done./We’ve got a long way to go and a short time to get there./I’m east bound, just watch ol’ ‘Bandit’ run” (Reed). The first-person plural “We” makes the audience complicit to deviant action without any *actual* action. The listener becomes part of the caper,

inciting an exhilarating tension. “Eastbound and Down” draws on a sense of heroism—“We’re gonna do what they say can’t be done”—and urgency—“We’ve got a long way to go and a short time to get there”—that appeals to emotion and self-image. Interestingly, neither “Convoy” nor “Eastbound and Down” engages the material implications of truckin’. The aesthetics of driving and the skill of the driver obscure the material consequences of excessive consumption of natural resources. These texts rewrite 1970s scarcity: songwriters love the image of drivers breaking through police barriers but are unconcerned with how much gas it takes to fuel a truck or how much rubber it requires to produce 18 tires. Likewise, both songs overlook *actual* acts of civilian disobediences, such as the trucking union’s strike after the 1973 embargo. Material limits matter very little when the textual setting is a mythic world where scarcity does not exist. And the trucking industry is merely one of oil’s many “converter chains.” Alongside numerous other industries, we begin to see how effectively economic and material exigencies are built into the scaffolding of cultural identity.⁷⁷

A more persistent example is present in 1970s popular film. The car chase movies of this era set a standard for high-octane action that permeates cinema to this day. Further, many of these films outrightly acknowledge gendered constructs shaped by and shaping driving. Consider *American Graffiti* one more time. The concluding drag race evokes two central questions: first, who is the best driver in the Valley? And second, who is the most capable man? By challenging John, Falfa hopes to answer both questions: the best driver is the most capable man (and vice

⁷⁷ Frederick Buell uses the term “converter chains” to show the ways in which oil worked throughout energy systems. For instance, he notes that after World War II, where oil was used for mostly combat purposes, new converter chains were needed in order to stabilize petro-industries during peace times. He uses the petrochemical industry as the primary example: used during the war to create new weapons, fuels, and medicines, the industry “metamorphosed” producing “plastics to pharmaceuticals, print inks to pesticides” (Buell, 81).

versa). To provoke John, Falfa attacks both his car and his masculinity. Midway through the film, both talk trash while stopped at a red light:

BOB FALFA: Hey man, I'm sorry if I scared ya!

JOHN: You're gonna hafta do one hell of a lot more than that to scare me!

BOB FALFA: Hey, I've been lookin' all over for ya, man. Didn't nobody tell ya I was lookin' for ya?

JOHN: Man, I can't keep track of all you punks runnin' 'round here backwards.

BOB FALFA: Hey you're s'posed to be the fastest thing in the Valley man, but that can't be your car, it must be your mama's car! I'm sorta' embarrassed to be this close to ya!

JOHN: Yeah, well I'm not surprised, drivin' a field car!

BOB FALFA: Field car? What's a field car?

JOHN: A field car runs through the fields, droppin' cow shit all over the place to make the lettuce grow.

BOB FALFA: Ha ha! That's pretty good! Say, I like the color of your car there, man.

What's that s'posed to be? Sort of a cross between piss yella' and puke green, ain't it?

JOHN: Well, you call that a paint job, but it's pretty ugly. I bet you got to sneak up on the pumps just to get a little air in your tires!

BOB FALFA: Well at least I don't have to pull over to the side just to let a funeral go by, man.

Falfa immediately implies John's bright-yellow Deuce Coupe isn't manly; John's retort questions Falfa's class position and whether or not he could even afford a car worth racing.⁷⁸

Later in the film, Falfa picks up a Modesto girl, Laurie, to broadcast his virility. John, despite

⁷⁸ Earlier in the film, Toad and others have warned John that Falfa's car has only the best equipment under the hood, so despite the insult John does know Falfa's car can hang.

trying with other girls, is only able to pick up the under-aged Carol (whom he drops off at home before the race). These challenges are meant to provoke John into racing, but they are also attacks on John's own adequacy as a man. When John finally agrees to race, these two spheres—driving and masculinity—become integrally intertwined. This race—and other car chases throughout 1970s American film—hints that the deepening connection between driving and late-century masculinity may be a losing proposition for American men.

Why does the car chase, specifically, become so emblematic of the pursuit of lost masculinity? Speed aesthetics are certainly an important contributor: driving fast suggests a specific vision of disobedience to authority that has been masculinized since the earliest phases of automobility. Concurrent to speed, however, the car chase advances spectacle in the 1970s because the prolific consumption of gasoline (and cars themselves), in spite of scarcity and economic recession, works against feelings of inadequacy and lack. These “chase” films (different from “chase” in *American Graffiti*) realize masculine identity on the road, through the car; they are not left with questions concerning identity and self-determination, unlike the teenagers in *American Graffiti*. The “chase” takes many forms: detectives, such as Frank Bullitt or Jimmy Doyle, who work outside the strict boundaries of the law; outlaws like Bo “Bandit” Darville and Grady Hagg, who prove more capable than the encroaching liberal society that attempts to regulate or limit their autonomy; or truckers, such as Rubber Duck, where the actual transport of commerce becomes a stage for the display of masculine endowment and virility.⁷⁹ Ultimately, what the chase scene does is prove the driver's capabilities while also engaging the

⁷⁹ Frank Bullitt (from *Bullitt*) and Jimmy Doyle (from *The French Connection*), Bo Darville (from *Smokey and the Bandit*), Grady Hagg (from *Moonrunners*), and Rubber Duck (Kris Kristofferson in *Convoy*) represent different masculine incarnations from different points in the decade. The masculinities they embody counter the fears and anxieties that fomented the crisis of masculinity in the 1970s: Cold War panoptics, government regulation, women's rights, racial integration, public versus private spheres, and the disappearing frontier.

audience's senses. In *The Speed Handbook*, Duffy explains the chase through exhilaration: "it was as if [speed], in the movie car chase... could energize the medium representing it" (118). Speed both livens the narrative and invigorates the viewer. In *Bullitt*, a historic car chase is the centerpiece of the film. *Bullitt's* final scene—a foot-chase through an airport—concludes the story but is slow and tactical; the car chase occurs earlier in the film, but *that* is the scene audiences and critics remember. Mirroring an Aristotelian model—wherein the film is able to cathartically exercise building tensions—the viewer is progressively energized as the chase accelerates. As the cars reach higher speeds, consuming more energy, tension and exhilaration obfuscates the consumption of material resource (gasoline) that fuels both the film's action and the viewer's immersion. Frank Bullitt's driving is more than just exciting onscreen action: the framework of the camera manufactures a way of imagining oneself occupying that role. The viewer, thus, is able to conceptualize, even embody to some extent, exercising the same power as Bullitt. This is seen specifically in the point-of-view camera shots, where the camera looks through the windshield from the driver's seat as Bullitt's Mustang GT slices through San Francisco. Bullitt's body is not visible in these shots, placing the viewer in the driver's seat. Even if the viewer is not *actually* traveling 80 mph, the impression is that he is—as Duffy explains, moments such as these "truly make its viewers sense excitements to be experienced" (153).⁸⁰ In the chase scene, the car and the camera stimulate thrilling sensory experiences—"a visceral and extended affect" (Duffy, 153). Likewise, petroculture frames what those sensations represent—independence, control, and power—and thus how the viewer's interiority is (re)shaped by those sensations. This is the moment in which the male lead is finally able to prove his worth. His prowess behind the wheel confirms to the audience his ability to accomplish the

⁸⁰ "He" purposefully refers to the implicit framing of the viewer as masculine. The viewer presumably views what Bullitt (who embodies the strong, independent, self-righteous masculinity) views.

larger masculine goals of the film, but also the epistemological goals of detection. Mechanical operation is merely one aspect of effective driving. Being able to navigate the road in ways that achieve justice (catching or killing the criminal) equates to superior ratiocination.

Smokey and the Bandit heroizes the deviancy of outlaw road culture and, unlike *Bullitt* or *Moonrunners* (neither of which was a box office hit), did so on the popular stage. The film earned over \$300 million in 1977, second only that year to *Star Wars*. The Bandit, Bo Darville, and his companion Cledus “Snowman” Snow (played by none other than Jerry Reed) are legendary runners transporting Coors beer from Texas to Georgia.⁸¹ Bo runs the “blocker” (a lead car that attracts and diverts the attention from law enforcement) while Snow drives a semi-truck filled with contraband. The film shares similarities with other trucker and chase narratives. Bo and Snow are likened to folk heroes opposing the heavy hand of the law. Law enforcement, specifically Sheriff Buford T. Justice (Jackie Gleason), is portrayed as sexist, racist, and oppressive. Justice pursues Bo endlessly across state lines, at first because his son’s runaway bride Carrie (Sally Field) escapes with Bo. However, Justice’s hunt soon evolves from maintaining the containment-era suburban nuclear family (and therein perpetuating the oppressive white patriarchal hierarchy he symbolizes) to personal vengeance. Bo, as the better driver and more capable man, eludes the sheriff at all turns. Bo embarrasses him professionally (across state lines) and shows his outlaw sensibilities are ultimately smarter and more practical than the sheriff’s oppressive midcentury ideologies. Though Bo himself subtly constructs of a masculinized gender ideology, his philosophy is supposedly more acceptable because it is not instituted by force or authority. Arresting Bo becomes Justice’s mission to restore his authority and reclaim his threatened masculinity. As in McCall’s “Convoy,” CB radio is prominently

⁸¹ The film claims it was illegal to transport Coors east of the Mississippi. In the opening scene, a trucker is arrested and cited for unsuccessfully running booze.

featured, a secret language the Bandit uses to anticipate police presence, avoid roadblocks, or solicit assistance from other drivers (to be fluent in CB-speak is to mark oneself as part of driving's heroically deviant subculture). At one moment in the film, a truck driver warns Bo of "Smokeys" down the highway; as the camera zooms out, we become aware the driver is getting a ticket from an officer at the very moment he's speaking to Bo over the radio—the implication here is that the officer does not understand what the trucker is saying even when it's being spoken directly in front of him. Public willingness to assist Bo further evokes a community that actively participates in this subculture. A diverse collection of CB-listeners use the radio to impede Justice or to signal safe routes. Outside of Sally Field's character, Carrie, this is the only time in the film where the viewer witnesses capable women who contribute to outlaw sensibilities: an old woman who spends her time on the CB radio, a group of prostitutes who are CB-fluent, and one lone woman trucker whose handle is (of course) "Little Beaver." Still, each of these characters are merely accompaniments to what the male lead's core mission: to outsmart (to outdrive) the old guard. Bo himself symbolizes the heroic nature of outlaw drivers. Everyone reveres him (except Justice), from black gas station attendants and roadside diner waitresses to highway prostitutes and funeral processions. He is always calm and collected, never rattled or worried. And their form of civil disobedience (transporting beer across state lines) counters government regulation that reflects limitations and scarcity. They don't run drugs or weapons; rather, they oppose impositions to personal freedom—that Coors can't be distributed east of the Mississippi—and provide the material means for people to have a good time.⁸² By running the beer, Bo and Snowman upset the compulsion to trace or limit one's consumption amidst scarcity. In fact, the film suggests scarcity does not exist if you can live and drive like Bo and Snowman.

⁸² As opposed to more dangerous drivers, such the motorcyclists whose clubs were labeled as domestic terrorist organizations in the 1970s.

The film exposes gasoline, which literally makes the excursion possible, less often than other material goods. Coors is the narrative's "fuel," and functions comparably to acid in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. *Smokey and the Bandit* doesn't completely ignore the gas station; like midcentury road narratives and other 1970s road films, however, *Smokey and the Bandit* depicts gas stations as social, communal spaces with cultural, narratological purpose, not as nodes of oil commerce that facilitate petro-infrastructures. These films seem to exist outside the material realities of oil and gas supplies, even as national petroanxieties triggered by scarcity dominate the American's commercial conscience. To counter petroanxiety, such films portray perpetually powered machines, cars and trucks whose operators did not need to worry about the gas crisis because they somehow never needed to refuel. This evolution of Enlightenment individualism hearkens to fossil-fuel's longer history as energy that allows the human greater control in shaping the environment they inhabit. Oil, more than other combustibles, greatly accelerates imposition of human will upon environment; to lose that power is to lose one's position within ecologies the human seems to control. The driver who doesn't need to worry about fuel prices or resource availability reestablishes his power over those forces around him (environmental and social) that would attempt to rein him in. Petroculture is at the heart of 1970s road films, but oil as material plays a diminutive role.

In *Smokey and the Bandit*, there are actually two moments where characters *do* acknowledge the material requirements of driving. In one instance, the Bandit pulls over at a gas station to fuel up. More significantly, this moment demonstrates the Bandit's egalitarian nature in opposition to Sheriff Justice's racism. Bo high-fives the black fuel-attendant and chats with him while he fuels the car. Justice has already expressed resentment that a Sheriff in Arkansas could possibly be a black man: "What is this world coming to?" he says in disbelief. Here, I

would note, Justice represents Jim Crow-era discrimination, while the Bandit represents the supposedly progressive new American who has moved beyond race post-Civil Rights. Despite Bo's open sociability, it is important we recognize that Bo, the white hypermasculine man, sits on the hood of his car and chats while the black attendant services the Trans Am. Bo does not share Justice's outward racism, but he is not *acting* in any way towards positive change. In the second instance, Snow pulls over at a roadside juke-joint to fuel up and is assaulted by a motorcycle club/gang. The bikers are associated with the dangerous portions of deviant driving's subculture: they are violent, unpredictable, and insular. In his escape, Snow runs over their bikes with his truck, preventing them from terrorizing the road further. The scene makes a clear distinction between the heroic deviancy of the runners and the criminality of the motorcycle club. Bandit and Snowman occupy the golden mean between bikers—too rogue—and sheriffs—not rogue enough.

The other reason I bring up the gas station is to claim a parallel with depictions (or lack thereof) of gasoline as material and representations of women within 1970s road films. In both gas station scenes in *Smokey and the Bandit*, gasoline itself is absent from the film. From pump to car, as long as the gas is properly contained and consumed, the material itself is merely a byproduct of the space that dispenses it. If the material escapes the bonds of transportation and consumer consumption, it is almost always in the form of spectacle (explosions) that serve narratological purpose. I claim 1970s road films depict women similarly, as characters confined to certain spaces and textual functions. By restricting female characters' agency on screen, women are relegated to supporting roles that at once define a new set of gender boundaries and progress masculine narratives. *Smokey and the Bandit* casts only one female character who has any depth (or even multiple appearances). Carrie (Sally Field) hitches a ride with the Bandit to

escape what seems to be a forced, preordained marriage to Sheriff Justice's son. Carrie is rebellious and wild: she seems spectacular in her escape, as if a feminine counter-narrative to the masculinization of the road. Yet, when Carrie enters the Bandit's Trans Am, she forfeits control of her own speed and direction to the driver—to Bo. What Carrie resists is Justice's containment-era gendered ideology; in return, she is subject to an entirely different portrayal of masculinity, but one that establishes strict gender roles, nonetheless. In most American 1970s road films, the role of the driver is a male position. The driver determines direction, speed, obedience. In other words, the man assumes control, not only of the car but of the narrative.⁸³ This is largely true throughout *Smokey and the Bandit*: the Bandit drives and is in control of movement. If Carrie wants to stop somewhere or do something, Bo ultimately decides whether or not she can. Thus, in surrendering her mobility, she forfeits control of her own story to the Bandit's narrative. She repeatedly asks Bo what he does for a living—"Be cool," is Bo's answer—trying to determine the legality of the chase she has unexpectedly entered. Late in the film, Bo pulls off the highway into lush, green park where he and Carrie have sex. Interestingly, Carrie initiates the action—"Don't you ever take that hat off for anything?" she asks. "Sure. I take it off for one thing," says the Bandit, "and one thing only." Unprompted, she says "Take that hat off. If you want to." Carrie to provoke their off-screen intimacy, but in reality Bo takes the first step: as soon as he pulls off the highway, the implications are clear. He never acts aggressively towards her; he doesn't need to, Carrie's attraction to him is natural and immediate. She might be willing, but Bo has constructed a situation with only one clear outcome. This is not to say Carrie is helpless: she enters the car of her own free will and, when presented an opportunity to leave, she stays with

⁸³ By "obedience," I mean the driver determines whether he and other passengers will follow the law. Bo, for instance, pushes lawbreaking to its limits, so much so that Carrie at one point asks him if he expected this much heat. Bo admits even he didn't think they'd be pursued so emphatically.

the Bandit. For a series of scenes, Carrie even drives the Trans Am, though Bo notes that if they encounter any real trouble, he ought to be driving. Even during her short sojourn behind the wheel, Bo directs the route. However willing she might be, Carrie understands that the Bandit will ultimately determine where and how far they will go.

As we see 1970s road films like *Smokey and the Bandit* or *Bullitt* or throughout the decade's popular music, chasing masculinity is textually and literally acted out on the road, pushing machine and human to physical extremes —thanks to oil. Manifestations of men being men on the road not only perpetuates the culture of oil capitalism, it places oil at the center of cultural conflicts arising from identity politics and national/global economic shifts. Oil is entangled with cultural and social politics that shroud economic and environmental consequences. Though early environmentalists in the late 60s and 70s worked to reveal these consequences, the ubiquity of oil makes the various repercussions extremely difficult to represent (LeMenager, 43-45).⁸⁴ Here again, I am reminded of symbols attached to the car, to the act of driving, and how those symbols obscure the material realities of oil capitalism. Rather than confronting the ecological and humanitarian consequences of petro-toxicity, the road narratives of the seventies either fall prey to nostalgia or accelerate the pursuit of threatened masculinity through heroic deviancy. *American Graffiti*, for example, has been highly criticized for romanticizing and white-washing the early 1960s at the height of civil rights activism. The entirely white, middle-class cast driving massive, glamorous cars chasing teenage desires is misleading. California's Central Valley is, in fact, incredibly diverse while the economic strata of the film's characters in no way represents an American majority, most of whom could not afford

⁸⁴ That is, outside of catastrophes such as the oil spill. Even then, as LeMenager makes clear in *Living Oil*, to focus on merely one image or branch of petroleum is to miss the thorough integration petroleum has made into American—and global—life.

a brand-new Thunderbird. The film confuses material realities by celebrating aesthetics and youth culture. Likewise, 1970s action films on the road are equally misleading. *Smokey and the Bandit* provokes dissidence towards figures of authority, but nonetheless subtly constructs gendered hierarchies reminiscent of the very authoritative bodies they claim to resist. Further, the film celebrates the evolutions of oil-petrochemical-capitalism, asserting that absolute commitment to oil can somehow break the bonds of regulatory limitations and material scarcity. *American Graffiti* portrays a pivotal historical moment, when many believed oil could still make the American dream possible. Seventies “chase” films, however, exist firmly within—both in on-screen and in culture—recognizable oil crisis. Though funny and exciting, the films have drastic impact upon the viewers’ perceptions of driving, resource consumption, and social roles. Most importantly, the environmental consequences of a reshaped petro-affect that submits to unmitigated oil consumption as the only way to assert agency and claim desire have lasting effects far into the future. Ultimately, identifying how and where petroculture has become entangled with social politics makes it possible to ascertain the environmental consequences that trail these stories.

Nebraska

Nebraska (though released in 1982) is, in many ways, the culmination of the Springsteen’s road ethos. After the optimism of *Born to Run* and the hard labor reality of *Darkness at the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska* is desperate, destitute. The flighty pianos and boisterous guitars, the driving drumbeats and “early morning harmonica” of earlier albums are replaced with simple, paced acoustic guitar and mournful minor-key harmonica. “These songs were the opposite of the rock music I’d been writing,” Springsteen writes. “They were restrained,

still on the surface, with a world of moral ambiguity and unease below. The tension running through the music's core was the thin line between stability and that moment when the things that connect you to your world, your job, your family, your friends, the love and grace in your heart, fail you" (299). What happens when the foundations of American life cannot deliver the promises of the American dream? Where does one turn to? Springsteen notes the voice of the album—and the murky, muttering vocals—was the "flat, dead voice that drifted through my town on the nights I couldn't sleep. The voice I heard when I'd wander in a three a.m. trance out onto the front porch of my home to feel the sticky heat and listen to the streets silent but for the occasional grinding gears of tractor trailers... pulling up South Street to Route 33 and out of town" (299). What happens to those American dreamers when they finally awaken from the dream? When the waking world is nothing but sticky heat and silent streets, intermittently interrupted by the sound of commerce leaving town? In *Darkness at the Edge of Town*, Springsteen builds a cast of characters who might be down but are not out. In *Nebraska*, the characters have shot their bolt.

The lead and title track begins with long harmonica notes, Dylan-esque deep breaths backed by soft fingerpicking on the acoustic guitar. The vocals are somber, the melody dulcet but descriptive, mimicking in tone the final confession of a man on the gallows (or, rather, the electric chair). The song is told from the perspective of Charles Starkweather at "midnight locked in a prison storeroom with leather straps across my chest." In 1958, Starkweather and his underage girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate murdered eleven people, a highway killing spree "from the town of Lincoln Nebraska with a sawed-off .410 on my lap/Through the badlands of Wyoming" where the speaker says, "I killed everything in my path."⁸⁵ In "Nebraska," the "badlands"

⁸⁵ Though the Badlands as we know them are in South Dakota, the high plains in Wyoming share a similar biome

transform from a space of contentious labor and confused self-identity to a vicious stage, where the speaker plays out feelings of disillusion and communal suffering through extreme violence. Further, in “Nebraska” the “badlands have a specific geography and ecology. The “badlands” are high plains, useless sagebrush scrubland that seemed unlivable to generations of frontiersman (though Native Plains tribes had successfully lived those lands for thousands of years). During the nation’s first oil boom, oil reservoirs in Wyoming brought new technologies, new industries, and new residents. Roads, built to increase oil extraction and commerce in the region, made the land more accessible (Yergin, 2008).⁸⁶ Despite the economic shift, the region remained a difficult place to live.

Strangely, the speaker in “Nebraska” has a more secure identity than any character in “Thunder Road” or “Badlands.” Springsteen explains “the writing was in the details; the twisting of a ring, the twirling of a baton, was where these songs found their character” (299). The speaker sees a girl, “standin’ on her front lawn just twirlin’ her baton.” Her willingness to enter his car, “Me and her went for a ride sir,” validates the speaker’s murderous intentions, but is also a commentary on containment and the confinements of postwar suburban life: given the choice between twirling a baton and highway murder, the choice is murder. The speaker tells the sheriff he has no remorse “I can’t say that I am sorry for the things that we done/At least for a little while sir, me and her we had some fun.” He has no motivations for the crimes, at least no motivations recognized by the criminal justice system. In the song’s last two lines, the speaker explains to the listener, “They wanted to know why I did what I did/Well sir, I guess there’s just a meanness in this world.”

⁸⁶ Teapot Dome Scandal

Starkweather's crimes take place in 1958; why then does this story resonate with Springsteen in the late-seventies and early-eighties? My first inclination is to claim the nature of the crimes reflect an increasingly violent, desperate national economic trajectory. But the connection seems too simple; Springsteen's conception of the album is far more complex. It seems pointed that Springsteen begins the album with yet *another* road narrative. "Nebraska" portrays the long history of postwar disillusion; moreover, the song recognizes the road as the space for the wayward petro-soul. Sal and Dean may have been content pursuing speed on the road, but the highway also provides more nefarious opportunities. As the limitations of/addictions to oil-petrochemical-capitalism continue to constrict and starve citizens hooked on oil, they are left with few alternatives. In a world with restricted pleasures, what is the couple left to do but create their own fun? Despite critical acclaim and mild success, Springsteen himself thought *Nebraska's* "quiet stillness" too austere: it is still his only major record not accompanied by a major tour on release (301).

Are These Actual Miles?

1970s road films give the impression that oil scarcity does not impact the dissident impulses of the outlaw driver. Rather, resistance to regulation and authority is framed as a reaction to economic recession and imposed limitations rooted in sociocultural changes of the 1960s. In reality, the decade's recession and resultant artistic responses are clearly the product of oil politics on a geopolitical scale. *American Graffiti* looks back to midcentury oil exuberance with longing and nostalgia, but also as a commentary on the state of energopolitics in the early-seventies. The iconic outlaw trucker, on the other hand, further mythologizes the road within contemporary settings to both reestablish the road as a space for masculine narratives and push

back against national material scarcity through filmic (mis)representations. Another form of textuality that emerges out of the energy crises of the 1970s was a resurgent realism termed “minimalism.” Minimalist writers, such as Charles Bukowski, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, and Raymond Carver, were particularly critical of American suburbia, which, by the mid to late-1970s, was increasingly unstable. The children raised during the decades of postwar oil surplus were faced with unsavory prospects: trimming luxury, selling assets, working longer hours, or, worse, being laid off. Shifting gender roles, infidelity, divorce, disillusion, despair, and unemployment all became key themes throughout minimalist texts, texts that attempted to succinctly and accurately describe the American (and human condition) within its current time. Raymond Carver’s short story, “What Is It”⁸⁷ from the 1976 collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, taps into channels of anxiety among American middle-class white males who expressed discontent with the social changes and economic instabilities stemming from the loss of “easy oil.” “What Is It” follows Leo and Toni, a suburban couple trying sell their car after filing for bankruptcy. The story struggles with sexual fidelity, consumer culture, and gendered expectations amidst oil-petrochemical-capitalism in the years after the 1973 OPEC embargo. Most importantly, “What Is It” observes that fundamental changes to the midcentury suburban nuclear family correspond with the economic and social impact of oil collapse. Due to financial hardship, the couple must sell one of their cars: a red convertible. Selling the car admits financial defeat, but it also affects the couple’s relationship. The car evokes memories and induces sentimentality. Unlike the decade’s films, “What Is It?” recognizes the impact of petroaffect as petroculture shapes American lives. This is to say: when life is good, it is very good and when it is bad, it is very bad.

⁸⁷ Also known as “Are These Actual Miles”

Toni once worked selling used cars. Leo worked “six days a week in the fiber-glass plant,” and their mutual financial success blossomed into a life of consumer excess (210). While both were working, they made enough that “they didn’t know how to spend the money” (210). Leo remembers their spending habits: they joined record clubs and book clubs to become cultured, threw “big parties” for their own pleasure and to project their social standing, traveled to Reno or Tahoe “at eighty with the top down and the radio playing” (212). “They buy what they want,” Leo reminisces, and “if they can’t pay, they charge it” (212). At their peak three years prior to the story’s setting, they buy a convertible. “It’s her car,” Leo remembers. That Toni not only has her own car, but a convertible at that, more than anything symbolizes their financial success. Neither practical nor cheap, the convertible is simply for aesthetic and sensory pleasure. Postwar economic growth doesn’t last forever, though, and the couple fall on hard times; the convertible is the last remaining large asset they own. Most of their belongings have been repossessed, so they must sell the car quickly before the bank places a lien on it. Symbolizing both their participation in consumer culture and the tenuousness of the American middle-class, selling the car means giving up any hope of recovering, both financially and socially.

As Toni and Leo enter the 1970s, the money dries up, as it did for many middle-class families during the decade’s recession. Though never explicitly explained, the implication is that both Toni and Leo lost work. After the oil crisis, car sales nationally plummeted; presumably, Toni’s job went with the car industry. Leo, too, seems to be out of work which could very well be part of slumping auto sales. Contoured car panels in the 1950s and 1960s were often fashioned out of fiberglass until advancements in industrial metal shaping made it possible to produce the same effect, often at lower costs. Further, being laid off at the fiberglass factory

parallels national trends during the 1970s, when much of America's industrial workforce shifted from the factory to finance and the service sector. Despite nearly three decades of economic rise, the United States experienced its first trade deficit of the postwar era in 1971. The oil embargo exacerbated deficits, stymying both production and purchasing nationally. Judith Stein explains that the drop in productivity throughout the 1970s meant increased labor costs, costs that companies were often unable (or unwilling) to cover (224). As domestic industries slowed significantly, Americans went looking for work in other markets. The explosion of stock trading in the 1980s is largely a reaction to this shifting workforce (224). However, Leo, a factory worker, has already proven himself unable to foresee or prepare for large-scale economic and social change. The couple's bankruptcy is proof of his failure as the head of the house. Similarly, his hesitation (or inability) to sell the car, something only Toni can do, shows he is also reluctant to acknowledge his wife's own agency. Because of his gendered expectations, Toni's abilities where he is deficient threatens his self-image. It is his inability to accept shifts in gender roles that creates larger conflict in regard to fidelity. Leo fails as a provider not simply because of economics but because he cannot imagine a family model where he does not solely shoulder that role.

Thus, the story begins with Tony preparing to sell the convertible. This is her charge, in part due to her experience, but also because she has proven herself more capable than her husband. Since Leo drove them to bankruptcy, she must steer them out of it. As the 1950s suburban family model breaks down, it may seem that gendered roles have suddenly switched—that Toni now takes on the man's role, providing for the family while Leo stays at home. However, the shift in power is more complicated than a simple reversal: suburban family roles—husband and wife, provider and caretaker—were built on the excess of cheap postwar oil, an

excess that disappeared with the 1973 oil embargo. In “contrast with portrayals of a besieged white masculinity,” Hall explains, Carver’s “male characters intersect with many discourses on wounded masculinity permeating American culture,” rendering a more nuanced vision of shifting gender roles in the 1970s (177-178). Initially, Leo seems blameless, a victim of circumstance; however, through Leo’s unease, Carver explores deeper origins of masculine anxiety. Of particular note is fear of infidelity. Leo is desperately afraid that Toni will sleep with another man. At first, it seems his worry stems from the transaction, that perhaps she will have to sell her body in order to sell the car. Over the course of the story, it becomes clear that Toni is actually quite furious, embarrassed at their unfamiliar poverty—home late and drunk, she screams at him, “Bankrupt... You son of a bitch!” (216). And she pokes fun at him: “I’d buy a car from you anytime,” Leo says. “But you don’t have any money,” she replies. “And your credit is lousy. You’re nothing” (209). She smiles and says she is “teasing,” but there’s truth in what she says: Leo *doesn’t* have money, his credit *is* lousy, and because of that he fears he actually is nothing. Leo is afraid Toni will find another man, a more capable man who can do more than just buy the convertible: he can afford to keep it.

To further complicate the fidelity plot, only a year prior Leo had had an affair. “Once last winter, during the holidays, when Toni and the kids were visiting his mother’s, Leo brought a woman home. Nine o’clock the next morning, a cold foggy Saturday, Leo walked the woman to the car, surprised Ernest Williams on the sidewalk with a newspaper in his hand” (210). Leo is struck by guilt, but ironically is nervous Toni will do the same thing. Leo’s affair, which took place when he still had money, is accepted as one of his masculine entitlements. Further, it is the action of one in power using that power to extract sensory pleasure from the world. Leo has never imagined a scenario where *he* is not the one occupying that position, where his wife is

presented with that same opportunity. Toni stays out very late the night she sells the convertible; the longer she is gone, the more anxious Leo becomes: "Inside he makes a large drink and he turns the TV on and he fixes something to eat. He sits at the table with chili and crackers and watches something about a blind detective. He clears the table. He washes the pan and the bowl, dries these things and puts them away, then allows himself a look at the clock" (213). He is agitated and uneasy. He takes care of the work at home, while Toni enjoys the outside world. Even though he remembers his own infidelity (and though the story never suggests that Toni has cheated previously), he cannot accept the possibility that she might also have an affair. He calls a restaurant, New Jimmy's, looking for her. He scans the road outside his house, hoping she will come home. When she finally does, near dawn, she is drunk and upset. He very nearly hits her, his fist cocked back. Toni says, "Go ahead," a final dismissal of any power Leo thinks he might wield. For one night, Leo lacks control. He experiences powerlessness and the inescapable uncertainty that comes with that loss.

What Leo fails to recognize in the fidelity plot is that his affair was chosen, whereas Toni is forced into a sexual confrontation by circumstance and financial necessity. They *must* sell the convertible, quickly and for cash, before the bank repossesses and they are left with nothing. Leo himself has placed Toni in the position that *he* dreads, that *he* expresses anxiety over. Carver shows readers that structures of patriarchal power and misogyny still exist, even if Toni assumes financial responsibility within the household. In order to sell the car, she has to look perfect. She is "a tall woman with a small high bust, broad hips and thighs" (209). She wears "a new white blouse, wide lacy cuffs, the new two-piece suit, new heels" (208). She spends "two hours on her hair and face," and finishes with a final pat of her hair and blot of her lips. When she leaves, Toni tells Leo to kiss her cheek, but points to a specific spot at the corner of her mouth so he

doesn't smear her makeup (209). Leo, in contrast, "scratches a pimple on his neck," his undershirt wet with sweat (209). She knows the buyer will be a man and explains the exchange as a sort of courtship: "I'll have to have dinner or something, I told you that already, that's how they work, I know them" (209). Though she is "smart and has personality," she knows the sale depends partially on her sexuality and the presentation of her body. Leo knows this as well, though he tries to repress that knowledge. As soon as Toni leaves, he pours a glass of scotch as his hand trembles, his anxiety skyrocketing (211). When she does get back, she stumbles through the door, her face puffy. When he grabs her, she "twists loose, grabs and tears his undershirt at the neck" (216). Leo's anger is dwarfed in comparison to what Toni has endured; though readers have spent the entire story following Leo around the house, narrating his emotions, it's clear that Toni is the one who has experienced trauma. In one last effort to regain some control, Leo puts her to bed, pushing "her from side to side undressing her" while she sleeps. He takes off her underwear, "looks at them closely under the light, then throws them in the corner" (217). Once she is unconscious and naked, he can inspect her to prove or disprove her devotion. He rummages through her purse and finds the check for the sale of the car. Even after she goes to such lengths to sell the car, she is still subject to male surveillance, still being policed by the men who have pushed her to such limits. Leo feels threatened, yet Toni is still the vulnerable character at the story's end.

Underpinning the narrative's conflict is oil, the economic and material scaffolding that made Leo and Toni's heightened consumerism, but also left them to financial ruin. Though already victim to the cycles of oil-petrochemical-capitalism, they are nonetheless surrounded by and invested in it. The convertible, for instance, is Toni's car. It can be repossessed because it is their second car; however, the bank won't place a lien on Leo's car because it is deemed a

necessity (the court has decided they need one car to get to work, buy groceries, and run errands—in otherwords, they need one car to effectively live within a petro-modern society). They need/are allowed access to a car because one must have a car to participate in the cycle of production and consumption, to prop up the petro-economy. In the backyard, waiting for Toni, Leo “listens to the traffic on the highway,” then contemplates killing himself: “[he] considers whether he should go to the basement, stand on the utility sink, and hang himself with his belt” (213). The traffic on the highway at once represents those who have been able to do what Leo cannot (successfully navigate the workforce) and the people who are trapped in the same consumerist model that trapped Leo and Toni. They are workers and buyers. They have the money to drive, to go out and purchase, something Leo cannot do, confined to the home waiting for his spouse. At the same time, those drivers are subject to the same economic shifts brought on by 1973 oil crisis: rising prices, gas shortages, mass layoffs. They are experiencing the same sociocultural changes, the same political shifts. Does Leo consider killing himself because everyone is more successful than him or because he sees and hears that everyone is trapped in the same consumer death cycle he is currently experiencing? It certainly seems a little of both. On some level, Leo recognizes the sound of the highway as the sound of both the world he has failed to succeed within and the world where others like him are destined to fail.

The end of “What Is It?” brings the decades complicates 1970s gender and energy crises in ways neither *American Graffiti* or *Smokey and the Bandit* can. Further, the road becomes the symbol of petroculture’s affectual impact, marked on the body and embodied in the mind. After Leo puts Toni to bed, the convertible pulls back into their driveway. A man gets out and places Toni’s makeup bag on the front stoop. Leo rushes out before he can drive away. Sensing trouble, the stranger interjects first: “‘What is it you want,’ the man says. ‘Look, I have to go. No offense.

I buy and sell cars, right? The lady left her makeup. She's a fine lady, very refined. What is it?" (217). For a moment, it seems as if Leo might confront him. He leans his weight against the door of the car and "wets his lips," as if preparing some speech. But the moment passes just as quickly. The man has already told Leo what he does—he is just a salesman—and anything that happened with Toni was, in his mind, simply part of the sale. Further, Leo is the one who sent Toni off on this errand; the man implies Leo must have already acknowledged, on some deeper level, what that meant, what it "is." Leo was willing to sell his relationship along with the convertible. Though the relationship was already strained, sending Toni into the night to handle their financial bankruptcy is the final admission that the relationship too is bankrupt. Leo loses the car, but, more importantly, he loses what little agency he may have had left. His grasp on the driver's door is a dying grasp at property and agency that afforded him aesthetic pleasure, social standing, and some semblance of secure identity. Leo is no longer a driver. Leo's response is simply, "Monday," the date of their hearing, which he believes will fix their problems. In this way, he reflects Carver's minimalist prose. His speech is never boisterous or long and he is unable to brave the conflict in front of him. The man's role is shrunken and muted by the style; as Leo faces his inadequacies, his power is minimized. He cannot ask about his wife's fidelity, no more than he can keep the convertible in his own possession. He has, essentially, been rendered impotent.

Here, I think Carver purposefully draws out the connection between shifting gender ideologies and the material/economic consequences of oil capitalism. Certainly, the convertible symbolizes a larger denunciation of exuberant midcentury oil capitalism, an implicit condemnation of consumer culture that average Americans can no longer support yet are expected to participate in. But even more importantly: by framing the story's larger conflicts

through the sale of the car specifically, Carver calls attention to the fundamental role petroculture plays in shaping both the characters' own interiority and their role within the material world they inhabit. Before the stranger leaves, he addresses Leo one more time:

“Well, goodnight,” the man says and coughs. “Take it easy, hear? Monday, that’s right. Okay then.” He takes his foot off the brake, puts it on again after he has rolled back two or three feet. “Hey, one questions. Between friends, are these actual miles?” The man waits, then clears his throat. “Okay, look, it doesn’t matter either way,” the man says. “I have to go. Take it easy.” He backs into the street, pulls away quickly, and turns the corner without stopping. (218)

The question, “Are these actual miles?” refers both to the convertible itself and to Leo and Toni’s relationship. As a car salesman, the stranger knows odometers are often tampered with. Whether he is saying it incredulously—Did you really drive this much!?—or pathetically—You drove this little?—remains ambiguous. His immediate dismissal—“Okay, look, it doesn’t matter either way”—shows the car’s mileage actually means very little to him. During 1970s scarcity, mileage (as efficiency and economy) becomes part of the American lexicon. The stranger only cares about the miles momentarily because he, unlike Leo, is not financially bankrupt. Efficiency and economy only matter in terms of revenue: he has already profited from the transaction and will continue to. The question “Are these actual miles?” hits strikingly at the personal conflicts brimming between Leo and Toni, as well. Lying in bed after the buyer has left, Leo caresses Toni’s hip. He sees her stretch marks and compares them to roads, tracing them on her skin (218). He tries to follow them, but “they run everywhere in her flesh, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them” (218). As the network branches out further and further, we understand that Toni is the more experienced traveler, as marked on her very body. Leo can try to sympathize, but the fact is

he does not understand the paths Toni has had to travel. These are miles Leo cannot navigate as they are miles he will never be asked to travel himself.

For me, Carver's "What Is It" acts as a counterweight to a much larger body of work throughout the 1970s that attempts to rewrite masculine road narratives threatened by the sociocultural changes of the 1960s. "Chase" films run counter to the nuance in Carver's work. These texts appropriate the road as a space to (re)imagine gender through the vein of heroic individualism celebrated during the 1950s. Carver's portrayals of women can be troubling. However, "What Is It" stands out in the collection of works in this chapter because it tangibly engages the complexities of 1970s economic, political turmoil, and personal identity-drama. Carver subtly addresses the confluence of gender politics and petroculture through financial and familial instability, *not* by celebrating the man's triumphant ability to restore containment-era gender roles or oil security. Leo's failures, failures of the masculine imaginary on the road, are marked on *Toni's* body. She bears the weight of petroculture, as if her body's network of roadway stretch marks becomes a part American petro-infrastructure itself. Likewise, the convertible moves beyond its material value and functions as a symbol that obscures its material purpose. The car is emblematic of a certain pursuit of self-identity that is highly invested in masculine narratives. When the convertible slips from Leo's grasp, much like his masculine securities, Toni bears the burden of Leo's failures, again with her body. What remains most disturbing is that, when the hypermasculine road narrative inevitably reveals itself a fantasy of oil-petrochemical-capitalism, it is the woman, not the man, who embodies the consequences.

Love Medicine

Louise Erlich's short story "The Red Convertible," from her 1984 collection *Love Medicine* illustrates another alternative road narrative, in which U.S. petrocultures intersect with Native American petrocultures. The story is narrated in 1974 from the perspective of Lyman Lamartine, a young Chippewa who recounts the history of "a red Olds" convertible purchased 1969, co-owned with his brother Henry, "until his boots filled with water" (177). Lyman, like Leo before his bankruptcy, is proud of the red convertible. The car is flashy and fun and sanctions a long summer road trip with Henry, driving throughout the western United States and western Canada. The convertible also sets him apart from the others on the reservation, a symbol of his unique talent to make money, "unusual in a Chippewa" (177). "I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation," Lyman states. The car, he says, seemed more than just a machine: it seemed to be alive, not "simply stopped, parked, or whatever" but "reposed, calm and gleaming" as if it had been patiently waiting for Lyman and Henry to find it (178). Lyman has a hint of Sal's highway romanticism but it's *different*: "some people hang on to details when they travel," he says, "but we didn't let them bother us and just lived our everyday lives out here to there" (179). Sal recounts every detail of his journeys: every place, every emotion, every observation because for Sal the road is a space to consume experiences. Lyman doesn't seem to be out for his "kicks." What he does remember from the road is Susy, who hitches with them back to her family's home in Alaska, and a place in Montana, "maybe on the Blood Reserve," beneath a willow tree, "the branches bent down all around me like a tent or a stable." The convertible certainly ties Lyman and Henry to infrastructures of petro-modernity, but their roots seem less determinative. Perhaps this is due in part to their ties to the reservation: Henry and Lyman both seem to straddle an invisible boundary (or perhaps *very* visible, mapped boundaries)

between postwar U.S. petro-modernity and the reservation, an entirely different version of petroculture—though not unrelated.

By late-1969, post-war U.S. petro-modernity catches up to them. Henry, who has never had Lyman's luck, is drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. He comes home three years later, "very different" (182). "The change was no good," Lyman says. Where Henry was once contemplative, quiet, and meditative, he was now restless, "jumpy and mean." Henry, baptized by napalm fire into U.S. Cold War geopolitics, contracts the nation's petroanxiety. Lyman does not totally understand the change, but he thinks back to the last time he and Henry seemed happy, driving the West in the red convertible. So, Lyman takes a hammer and busts the red Olds to shit, despite keeping it in pristine condition the three years Henry was in Vietnam. "By the time I was done with the car," he says, "it looked worse than any typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads, which they say are like government promises—full of holes" (184). Lyman inadvertently recognizes that Henry's anxieties, which are obvious signs of post-traumatic stress, are in part due to Henry's abrupt transition from American road life—the paved highway, oil-petrochemical commerce, and of course the Vietnam War itself—to the reservation road life. Fixing the convertible gives Henry a sense of purpose. The mechanical work places him, again, at least partially within the petro-modern framework he experienced during the war. When the convertible can finally run again, Lyman and Henry go for a drive "toward Pembina and the Red River because Henry wanted to see the high water" (186). "The top was down and the car hummed like a top," Lyman says. "It was beautiful. When everything starts changing, drying up, and clearing off, you feel like your whole life is starting. Henry felt it, too." Here, Lyman refers to the seasonal progression, spring as rebirth where Lyman and Henry feel like nature: shedding the old and starting anew. At the same time, Lyman refers to the

convertible itself and the roads it allows them access to. At peak condition, the car seems to offer up a whole new world.

When they reach the river, Henry experiences an awakening; Lyman says he felt it too, that he was “feeling what Henry was going through at that moment” (187). Their proximity to the river heightens their environmental awareness. Both seem to recognize that nature, *not* the car, is restorative. Henry tries to give Lyman the car, but Lyman doesn’t want it. Here, Lyman and Henry’s trajectory diverges from Leo and Toni’s. Leo and Toni are forced to give up their red convertible, the symbol of their status and wealth, but remain inescapably products and perpetuators of U.S. petro-modernism. For Lyman and Henry, the convertible tethers them to a deceptive “American” narrative they recognize does not represent their Native American narrative. The red convertible is a weight neither wishes to bear in the way Toni must bear the weight of the red convertible in “What Is It?” The urge towards nature, away from the road, is so strong that Henry leaps into the Red River, overwhelmed by the high water. Lyman remembers Henry’s last words--“My boots are filling”—“He says this in a normal voice, like he just noticed and he doesn’t know what to think of it. Then he’s gone” (189). Lyman searches for him unsuccessfully. In the last paragraph of the story, Lyman does not mourn Henry. He does not drive home, or to the police to begin search and rescue. Instead, he turns on the car’s highbeams, puts it in first gear, and watches as the convertible “plow[s] softly into the water” (189). The car disappears. Lyman stands in the dark, listening to the river, “the sound of it going and running and going and running and running.”

The road narrative takes a major turn in the 1970s. The optimism of midcentury petroculture is replaced with scarcity; from that scarcity, narratives of nostalgia, forced gender ideologies, and economic, cultural despair. By the early eighties and nineties, new road

narratives illustrate alternative textualities, texts that continue to view the road as a primary site of material and environmental conflict within petro-modernity but also recognize the road as a space plotted by white male histories that do not—cannot—convey the road’s more complex nuances. Carver’s “What Is It?” and Erdich’s “The Red Convertible” both portray families drawn into conflicting versions of seventies American petro-modernity. Carver illustrates the burdens of petroculture upon the suburban American family, the inescapable confines of petro-infrastructure literally inscribed on the bodies of his characters. Erdich, however, suggests an off-road alternative: an environmental ethic, rooted in the willow and the river. New voices, voices with alternative racial, gender, and sexual backgrounds leading into the 1980s and 1990s offer similarly alternative readings of the road. These texts, specifically William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*, Eddy Harris’ *South of Haunted Dreams*, and Erika Lopez’s *Flaming Iguanas*, each characterize distinct voices (what I call alternative subjectivities or alternative drivers) that take to the highway in an effort to rewrite the road as a space with shifting significances for drivers marginalized from the predominantly white, masculine, heteronormative postwar road tradition.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT CAN THE ROAD DO FOR YOU?: ALTERNATIVE DRIVERS AND ALTERNATIVE SUBJECTIVITIES THROUGH THE 90S

“We didn’t really feel that we had achieved anything wonderful until yesterday... we did not really become elated until we mounted Pikes Peak. Now we know we have really done a wonderful thing. Why, we fairly raced away from the automobiles and motor buses, both going and coming, and we didn’t have to dismount once.”

Adeline Van Buren, *Grace and Grit: Motorcycle Dispatches from Early Twentieth Century Women Adventurers*, William M. Murphy.

“Alternative Driving” and “Alternative Subjectivities” on the Highway

In 2016, BMW and the Indian Motorcycle Company sponsored a three-week transnational motorcycle tour to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of a momentous road trip (Kekis). In 1916, the Van Buren sisters, Augusta and Adeline, drove from New York to California, covering “5,500 miles” on two “Indian Power Plus motorcycles” (Ensanian, 348-349). Their plan was to follow the Lincoln Highway, “one of the nation’s early transcontinental highways” and the leading model for good roads highways (Schaeffer, 130). The Lincoln Highway bound together regions across distance, stimulating the “ritual of citizenship” that Schaeffer explains had become increasingly bonded to roads and automobility. While Schaeffer notes the varying parties that celebrated the Lincoln Highway (in 1915, Newton Fuessle went as far as to say the “whirl of sinister events in Europe” had “clothed the project of the Lincoln

Highway Association with singular importance”), the highway was still in its infancy: portions were easily navigable, specifically those closest to the Northeast, but huge sections were poorly maintained and confusingly mapped (130). Good-roads highways were pioneering but the graded dirt roads were notoriously difficult to traverse. Good roads advocates and highway associations had little to no technological capability, so roads were maintained by local farmers with equipment used for plowing and agriculture. Likewise, these early versions of transcontinental roadways were unpaved: inclement weather caused frequent washouts, muddy potholes, and dangerous surfaces that stranded many would be motorists (Belasco, 22). Asphalt road surfaces were not common until the oil boom years in the twenties, the same time the Federal Highways Commission approved construction of numbered state highways (Belasco, 138-139). Still, domestic tourism grew in exponents, particularly during World War I. Schaeffer notes roads and automobiles contributed to a new sense of nationalism, a “ritual of citizenship” that was touted by tourists, adventurers, and interested motorists, but also by good roads advocates, automobile manufacturers, and oil companies.

For Augusta and Audie, however, the highway represented a different sort of opportunity entirely, an entry into another form of Great War nationalism: through their journey, the sisters hoped to prove to the nation that women could contribute to the war on the front, as dispatch riders, not simply as supportive onlookers from across the Atlantic. In a 2016 interview, Robert Van Buren, Augusta and Adeline’s great-nephew, stated the immensity of the undertaking: “When you really think about it, that’s four years before women had the right to vote... They’re trying to prove that women can contribute to the war effort that they knew was coming” (Kekis). If they could travel from coast to coast on the muddy, rutted, often isolating Lincoln Highway, surely that would prove they were capable of navigating similar conditions overseas. The sisters

rode over mountains peaks, through wilderness, and through periods of extreme weather. They “dressed in leathers” and military uniforms, “getting arrested several times for wearing men’s clothing” (Kekis). They were both in peak physical condition and were especially “mechanically adept.” Early motorcars and motorcycles were infamously difficult to maintain, especially on transnational tours that covered thousands of miles. Armand Ensanian explains “early machines were prone to the usual problems associated with pioneer technology and often required roadside repairs. These included broken leather drive belts or chains, fouled spark plugs, dirty ignition contact points, gummed carburetors, stuck valves, disintegrating clutches, and more severed mechanical malfunctions” (352). Thus, the earliest forms of autotouring were limited to travelers of a certain audacious disposition, but who also possessed the mechanical savvy and physical aptitude to keep their machines intact. Ensanian notes Adeline felt their achievement proved without a doubt her ability as a driver; however, her application to the U.S. Army was rejected, a decision Ensanian claims must have been motivated by “male insecurity” (350).

It’s funny to me that BMW and Indian, 100-years after the Van Burens’ road trip, decided to venerate the sisters’ journey, knowing full well that Augusta and Adeline’s social protest had been unsuccessful. In fact, references to their journey seem to largely focus on their happiness, the joy and adventure they experienced while on the road, *not* on their social commentary. This is certainly in part a reaction to postwar depictions of the Motorcycle Club (MC), which struggled between two national portrayals: the Touring Motorcycle Clubs (TMC), mostly made up of adventurous travelers who held an obsession with machines, and the Outlaw Motorcycle Club (OMC), which, throughout the late-twentieth century, became increasingly associated with violence and criminality. Outlaw drivers were a popular character archetype in seventies film not simply due to their wanton disregard for oppressive authority figures but

because of the romantic masculine industriousness they seemingly effortlessly symbolized. They were, in a sense, the cinematic realization of all midcentury easy oil optimisms, optimisms that 1970s Americans were coming to recognize had not, could not be realized in their own lives. The motorcycle outlaw or biker, however, held a different sort of cultural *cachet*, one that was increasingly representative of motorcyclists more generally in popular media. The nation first began to notice the OMC after the Hollister riot in 1947, at an AMA rally that exceeded expected turnout by several thousand bikers. The residents of Hollister and sanctioned AMA MCs anticipated a modest gathering (these kinds of patriotic, tourist rallies were common immediately after the war, especially with newly-returned G.I.s). When nearly three-thousand motorcyclists roared into town, some sanctioned by the AMA and some not, the rally transformed into a giant brawl.⁸⁸ Several residents were injured, few arrests were made, and most of the guilty parties rode off into the sunrise. Hunter S. Thompson, who came to fame studying biker subculture, recounts the Hell's Angels rise to national prominence years later in 1964, after a vicious gang-rape in Monterey, CA: "at least twenty of these dirty hopheads snatched two teen-age girls, aged fourteen and fifteen, away from their terrified dates, and carried them off to the sand dunes to be 'repeatedly assaulted'" (13). Though several arrests were made, the consequences seemed inconsequential compared to the violent act itself. The group reveled in public fear and remained aloof about the severity of their crime. Likewise, Wolfe's account of the Hell's Angels visit to Kesey's compound in La Honda, curious about the Merry Prankster's "edge of the city" reputation (but also their acid) is similarly vicious. Wolfe details a number of Kesey's LSD-

⁸⁸ The event would have gone largely unnoticed nationally were it not for the 1953 film *The Wild One*, based on the events in 1947. The film's two warring MCs, the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club and the Beetles (fictional MCs based on the two belligerent gangs at Hollister, the Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington and the Booze Fighters), troubled viewers but excited bikers. Hunter S. Thompson claims the film "gave the outlaws a lasting, romance-glazed image of themselves, a coherent reflection that only a very few had been able to find in a mirror, and it quickly became the bike rider's answer to *The Sun Also Rises*" (63).

fueled free-love parties, but the addition of the Angels quickly shifts the “flow” to violence, ending with a group of bikers sexually abusing a young woman on psychedelics who is clearly beyond the bounds of consent. In spite of their outsider statuses, violence remained a distinct separation between the Pranksters and the Hell’s Angels. The Pranksters, though goofy and abnormal, were non-violent. The Hell’s Angels were (are) rapists. Biker subculture represented a far more radical social deviance, a more permanent protest against suburban life, regulating personal indulgence, and national authority. To be on the bus, it seems, is not the same as being on the bike.

Even as the OMC began to dominate national media, Thompson explains “most cyclists are harmless weekend types, no more dangerous than skiers or skin-divers” (36). The AMA, BMW, and the Indian Motorcycle Company all understand that their base, the largest consumer, is not the OMC, but the TMC. By focusing on the Van Buren sisters’ speed pleasures and travel achievements, it is far easier to depict the motorcycle as simply another form of motorized pleasure, analogous to the automobile or any other form of highway transportation. Yet, at the same time, motorcyclists claim the attraction to the machine is deeper than that: in spite of the motorcycle’s individualized construction, bikes generate a unique form of social contact. The American Motorcycle Association (AMA), formed in 1924 to protect “the future of motorcycling and promoted the motorcycle lifestyle,” states their organization is comprised of “members come from all walks of life,” a diverse collection of interested peoples who “navigate many different routes on their journey to the same destination: freedom on two wheels” (American Motorcycle Association). AMA MCs of all varieties were formed upon the basis of camaraderie, upon the understanding that somehow the motorcycle was *different*—just not *too* different, not the OMC-version of different.

The paradox formed here, between the effort to blend into petromodernity and the desire to claim uniqueness, presents an interesting challenge in assessing American road narratives. How does one account for drivers or texts that are confined to the road, but not confined to the same histories or ideologies and, therein, to the same expressions of containment-social dissidence that demarcate popular consumption of the road narrative? What happens when “alternative drivers” pursue “alternative subjectivities” on the road? The biker’s road narrative begins similarly to Beat/Hippie midcentury oil exuberance yet quickly diverges from *On The Road* or *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Thompson explains the origins of the postwar Motorcycle Club (MC) in *Hell’s Angels*:

The whole thing was born, they say, in the late 1940s, when most ex-GIs wanted to get back to an orderly pattern: college, marriage, a job, children—all the peaceful extras that come with a sense of security. But not everybody felt that way. Like the drifters who rode west after Appomattox, there were thousands of veterans in 1945 who flatly rejected the idea of going back to their prewar pattern. They didn’t want order, but privacy—and time to figure things out. It was a nervous downhill feeling, a mean kind of *Angst* that always comes out of wars... a compressed sense of time on the outer limits of fatalism. They wanted more action, and one of the ways to look for it was on a big motorcycle. (36)

Founding club members were dissatisfied with containment-era politics, with authority, and the fixed identity of the suburban nuclear family. They resisted the security of postwar suburbia because they did not fit suburban molds, even as they attached themselves to the security of easy oil. The “action” Thompson refers to even rings of the immediate postwar road narrative. One of the Angels arrested in connection to the Monterey rapes, Terry the Tramp, explains “All we want to do is have some fun and relax” (15). In some ways, Terry the Tramp’s declaration sounds an

awful lot like Sal and Dean's "kicks" or the Merry Prankster's "flow." Like the casts in *On The Road* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the OMC had come to believe that the world they inhabited existed purely for one's pursuit of sensory pleasures—the OMC proved they were just willing to go much further in that pursuit.

The OMC portrays just one form of alternative subjectivity on the road. In Chapter One, I discussed the Civil Rights Movements' interruption of petro-infrastructures through the disruption of public bussing. Freedom rides and bus boycotts in Louisiana and Alabama both identify the road as the material cultural network of petroleum ideologies. These movements took to the road for alternative, socially active purposes: to disrupt roads and conceptions of mobility in order to affect sociocultural change. In this chapter, I propose that the road narrative in the 1980s and 1990s expands to new voices and new drivers who take to the road for purposes beyond simply personal transformation, "alternative drivers" exploring "alternative subjectivities." American highways are bounded spaces constructed for commercial transport; as I claim in earlier chapters, the road narratives produced out of these spaces are predominantly white, middle-class, and male. Yet, as the century unfolds, these branching road networks are used by an increasingly diverse citizenry. These voices, including William Least Heat-Moon in *Blue Highways*, Eddy Harris in *South of Haunted Dreams*, and Erika Lopez in *Flaming Iguanas*, explore more valuable questions concerning the nature of American identity, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality in relation to petromodernity. These road narratives explore minority histories and identities via alternative forms of mobility on the road. Specifically, I am interested in how marginalized drivers/voices attempt to drive/write non-normative narratives on and within uniformly normative space. The struggle between the road's supposed egalitarianism

framed against realities of race, gender, sexual, and class conflict, takes on new meaning as midcentury exuberance transforms into late-century petro-anxiety (Buell, 70).

Most importantly, *Blue Highways*, *South of Haunted Dreams*, *Flaming Iguanas* complicate conceptions of environment produced by road narratives. Is it possible to be on the road *and* foster a progressive environmental ethic? Or does participation within and contribution to petromodernity ultimately offset a driver's social critiques? Is a road narrative that is both socially productive and environmentally aware even imaginable? I posit that each of these works attempt to create communal affect: connecting and reconnecting with people, history, and culture through alternative forms of contact, over and against the ideology of individualism that defines midcentury road narratives. Many eighties and nineties-era road trip narratives use the road as a way to explore cultural history as much as personal history, viewing the road as connective tissue between lost American narratives. This is, in part, a response to the kind of infrastructural/sociocultural conditioning conceptualized by midcentury road architects and actualized through the Interstate Highway System, shaping and reshaping not only the American landscape but the minds of American drivers. However, I claim a major component of these projects is a reaction to increasing knowledge of human impact upon local, regional, and global environments. Each work is underscored by anxiety over toxicity, pollution, contamination, and loss, revealing an underlying fear of impending environmental collapse that counters the limited pursuit of individual pleasure. Ultimately, I claim that *Blue Highways*, *South of Haunted Dreams*, and *Flaming Iguanas* begin to unveil deep ties between petromodernity and forms of modern injustice. Though each text at times falls prey to the same transformative midcentury impulse of earlier road narratives, the anthropological aspirations of each reach beyond the bounds of the self: observing, recovering, and reforming.

Blue Highways: What is America?

Blue Highways (1982) chronicles William Least Heat-Moon's 1978 journey through America's back-roads in a 1975 Ford Econoline Van named "*Ghost Dancing*" (8). Least Heat-Moon is concerned with American identity and authenticity, particularly in response to the spread of mass culture. Renee Bryzik explains his project as a challenge to "monocultural assumptions of America" (699), while Pamela Walker calls it a "struggle against solipsism" (288). Least Heat-Moon himself describes the journey as the pursuit of harmony. A deeply ecological and anthropological work, Least Heat-Moon is driven by two classic American questions: what is America? and what constitutes an American?⁸⁹ Throughout *Blue Highways*, interpersonal experiences are equivalent to authenticity: one can renounce mass culture through social and ecological contact that attempts to understand and empathize with other actors. These examples are multitudinous, starting with Least Heat-Moon's preference for rural highways rather than interstate highways. Likewise, *Ghost Dancing* is Least Heat-Moon's realization of "alternative driving." The van, which he refers to as a "wheel-estate," has been converted from a "clanky tin box into a place at once a six-by-ten bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and parlor" equipped with bed, sink, stove, and composting toilet (8-9). The "wheel-estate" indicates his aversion chain motels, parking laws (police often wonder why a grown man is sleeping in a van in a private parking lot), and also to speed pleasure. The van is slower than the cars and trucks that populate the interstate. *Ghost Dancing* invites Least Heat-Moon to slow down, to deliberate his surroundings. He attributes many of his discoveries and experiences to the fact that he is *not*

⁸⁹ Many others, including Lawrence Buell, Bill McKibben, Bryzik, and Walker have addressed *Blue Highways'* ecological voice. While I will touch on this later in the chapter, I will spend most of this section focused on the material implications of Least Heat-Moon's road travel and the infrastructures of the road.

pursuing speed pleasure. Rather, he is looking for groves of sycamores or interested parties with which to establish environmental and anthropological contact (17).

Ghost Dancing further emblemizes Least Heat Moon's pursuit of an alternative subjectivity on the road, a pursuit that becomes something of a paradox at times. *Ghost Dancing* is named after a Plains Indians dance, "desperate resurrection rituals... the dying rattles of a people whose last defense was delusion—about all that remained to them in their futility" (5). Here, Least Heat-Moon references his Native American ethnicity (he is half Osage) and colonial expansion westward that massacred native peoples under the auspices of nation building. At the same time, *Ghost Dancing* seems a commentary on U.S. infrastructural trajectory in the eighties, particularly the growth of interstate highways that spread petroculture and standardize one's contact with places and peoples. He understands his gesture might be futile (the interstates will be constructed) but the dance is all he has left. His investigations into authentic America can, if nothing else, expose petromodernity's penchant for regulation and standardization. One of Least Heat-Moon's more notable measurements of authenticity is the "calendar café." Least Heat-Moon claims one can judge the quality of a café by the number of calendars on the wall: "There is one almost infallible way to find honest food at just prices in blue-highway America: count the wall calendars in a café" (26). If there is no calendar, the café might as well be "an interstate pit stop;" at a four-calendar café, you have to "try the ho-made pie too." At first glance, the "calendar café" seems a cute, almost whimsical cataloging. However, considering the context of the highway travel guide (for instance, the MOBIL GUIDE's predilection for categorization to encourage highway commerce), the "calendar café" becomes a sharp critique of commercialization, a counter-weight to petroculture. The extremely rare five-calendar café—"Keep it under your hat, or they'll franchise"—reveals his anxieties about authenticity in the

corporate homogeneity of petromodernity (27). Only once has he found a six-calendar café and has only heard rumors of a seven-calendar café. The implication is that, as the café gains authenticity, it is increasingly attractive to the blue-highways traveler. At the same time, more authentic (or better) cafés are increasingly susceptible to the commercialization that Least Heat-Moon opposes. For the café to accumulate calendars, it must remain secret, mythological even. Authenticity, then, is not necessarily meant for personal pleasure.

Over the course of the text, authentic Americans are increasingly contrasted with interstate highway suburbia: “cardboard” and “colorless,” a “tyranny” Least Heat-Moon must at times suffer. The alternative, the “blue highways,” references America’s “back roads”:

On the old highway maps of America, the main routes were red and the back roads were blue. Now even the colors are changing. But in those brevity’s just before dawn and a little after dusk—times neither day nor night—the old roads return to the sky some of its color. Then, in truth, they carry a mysterious cast of blue, and it’s that time when the pull of the blue highway is the strongest, when the open road is beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself. (1)

The harmony Least Heat-Moon seeks out is a function of the mind but also a product of the material world wherein the “blue highway” transforms human interiority: “maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens an inner one” (17). This sort of affectual change is not to be found in the cities or on the freeways, but rather in those spaces seemingly forgotten by the progress of petroculture. There is some notion that authentic Americans are rural Americans and that ecocentricity is best fostered on rural highways. Admittedly, Least Heat-Moon understands that even the most avid opponents of technological and infrastructural change are swimming against a powerful current,

but he nonetheless attaches to America's back roads as representative of the nation's most diverse and memorable spaces. He meets farmers, students, doctors, lawyers, Interpretive Rangers with the National Park Service, and various police officers. He listens to innumerable stories from white, black, and brown Americans, from Navajo and Hopi, conservative and liberal, old and young. *Blue Highways* is at once a collection of anthropological encounters and at the same time deeply "ecosensitive" (Bryzik, 670).

The paradox that Least Heat-Moon encounters is in his distinction between interstate highway petrocultures and blue highways petrocultures. Least Heat-Moon's notions of authenticity are as much a product of interstate highway culture as they are a reaction to late capitalism: when the Interstate Highway System remapped American mobility at the mid-century, only then were "blue highways" rendered as back roads. The maps he references, like to MOBIL GUIDE, were oil company products. Each atlas claimed its own versions of authenticity, substantiating regionalisms by characterizing place through a series of representative experiences—surprisingly similar in some ways to his own travel methodology throughout the text. At the time of his travel, Least Heat-Moon claims interstate highways made up only one-percent of America's roadways, but accounted for nearly a quarter of the nation's traffic (14). "For the blue highway traveler," he writes, "freeing roads like this one is the purpose of the interstates." What he seems to miss in his assessment is how the blue highway is nonetheless a version of petroculture. Blue highways are, in fact, the network that first lays the ground for postwar petromodernity. While they may represent something *different* than interstate highways, blue highways are still complexly interwoven into the fabric of twentieth-century petroculture.

Nevertheless, Least Heat-Moon constructs his alternative subjectivity upon the distinction between highway cultures. The Interstate suggests competing versions of America: Interstate

America, entrenched in neoliberal economics and big business; and Back Roads America, a rural network perceived as less standardized and, therein, less modern and less cosmopolitan. In other words, the Interstate remapped the nation in ways that were disingenuous, too constructed and uniform. Take Holbrook, Arizona for instance: once a “tough town” on Route 66, “where boys from the Hash Knife cattle outfit cut loose,” I-40 inexorably altered the town’s demographics (173). Holbrook is now a “tourist stop for women with Instamatics and men with metal detectors,” Least Heat-Moon views the economic transition from “big business cattle” to recreational “rocks and gems” as a forfeiture (173).⁹⁰ The surrounding desert and Navajo Reservation are far more interesting and deserving of his attention. What Least Heat-Moon most importantly identifies is that interstate highways are simultaneously destructive and productive: as central components of expanding petroculture, their absence makes certain parts of the nation that which is *not* interstate highway culture—something Least Heat-Moon views as therefore more “American.”

The notion that rural Americans are more ecosensitive is complicated by the industries (agriculture, mining, weapons testing) that network blue highways. Problematically, Least Heat-Moon often conflates blue-collar labor with authenticity, sometimes forgetting that industries such as cattle driving (akin to the Hash Knife Outfit, one piece of a much larger land management company throughout the southwest) were earlier evolutions of the corporate model he condemns along the Interstate. Much of Least Heat-Moon’s characterization is romantic and depends on a certain idealistic nostalgia. To engage these romantic impulses, we would have to overlook that *Ghost Dancing* has a fuel economy (25 miles to the gallon), that Least Heat-Moon begins his journey with nothing but the remnants of his savings account *and* four gasoline credit

⁹⁰ The Hash Knife Outfit, also known as the Aztec Land and Cattle Company, was a private land management company with massive holdings in Arizona. Mostly the land was used for cattle ranching.

cards. We would have to forget that blue highways are still highways. While state highways do not represent the same corporatist impulse Least Heat-Moon associates with interstate highways, they were certainly built for commercial purposes. Least Heat-Moon often celebrates the blue highway for its blue-collar, seemingly organic origins; in reality, most of America's back roads replaced and networked older, local routes constructed and maintained to promote regional commerce. The Natchez Trace—a highway in Mississippi that Least Heat-Moon claims is proof that “highway does not have to outrage landscape” (104)—transformed over centuries from a wildlife migratory track and game trail to a central route for overland trade between the Mississippi River and Nashville, Tennessee. Currently, the Trace is 444-miles of paved road, maintained by the National Park Service for tourism and recreation.⁹¹ Similarly, on U.S. 50 at New Pass Station, Nevada, Least Heat-Moon evokes the Pony Express, celebrating the riders who transported letters across American deserts in spite of extreme personal dangers (197). Here again, Least Heat-Moon tends to romance; though the Pony Express riders have “left a deep mark on the American imagination” as “touchstones of courage and strength,” their primary purpose—to facilitate communication between the eastern United States and California—had a commercial basis.⁹² Roads have always functioned as a way of directing commerce and providing industry with an accessible work force. To forget the road's material purpose does injustice to the layers of history Least Heat-Moon invigorates.

⁹¹ There is historical preservation happening on the Trace, as well as some progressive environmental action: “Being that the parkway is 444 miles long, this means that the park acts as a ‘greenway’, or habitat corridor, for the myriad of animal species that inhabit this part of the country” ([National Park Service](#)).

⁹² Least Heat-Moon himself recognizes as much: he notes that keeping California connected to the Union—“a northern defense strategy”—helped fund Union military efforts in the Civil War, as California was the central hub of the gold trade during the mid-nineteenth century. However, the Pony Express gave way to privatized stagecoach transport, the beginnings of Wells Fargo, which remains one of the largest and most dominant U.S. corporate structures.

How then does *Blue Highways* engage an alternative subjectivity on the road? My intention here is not to demean Least Heat-Moon's project, but rather to point out that the Interstate Highway System is simply another in a long line of commercial replacements directing and redirecting Americans to certain forms of consumption and industry. Least Heat-Moon evokes a complex, significant entanglement throughout his journey. His movement towards communal affect and ethnic history help to separate his time on the road from that of his midcentury predecessors. Automobility and commerce may equal an American authenticity, but it does not equal a Native American authenticity. Despite his proclivity for romanticization, Least Heat-Moon seems aware of the problematic binary he exists within and at times purports. In most cases, the economic and humanitarian crises that Least Heat-Moon observes began long before the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, calling into question the ethics of labor and industry—of which the road offers merely one of many intersecting mythologies.

Least Heat-Moon seeks out marginalized voices; through this, he complicates the purposes of the road narrative and notions of identity attached to the road. "Blue highways" are the roads that Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty travel in *On the Road*. The surfaces and technologies that provide exciting new sensory experiences in the late-1940s are by the late-1970s viewed as slower, more contemplative roadways. Sal Paradise travels Route 6 west early in *On The Road* because it represents his manifest destiny, "one long red line" that ends in Ely, Nevada. For Sal, it is the clearest, most direct path West, away from New York and towards a new life. In *Blue Highways*—only thirty years later—Route 6 is a memorial. When Least Heat-Moon reaches Ely—where, echoing Sal, he salutes "the longest federal route under one number in the days before the interstates" terminates—he observes tired bartenders, slumping waitresses, and empty blackjack tables. Slot machines ring in the background, an old woman "face as blank

as a nickel slug, pulling dutifully on the slot handles. She had stood before the gears so many times she herself had become a mechanism” (190). In this instance, Least Heat-Moon does not apotheosize the past. Ely is not a town to admire, and perhaps never was. For Sal, Ely is a distant symbol of individual potential, but for Least Heat-Moon the town serves as a depressing collective engagement. Forgotten as the routes of industrial modernity are carved elsewhere, the people themselves become machines in an attempt to keep pace. Ely is sad place: mired in complacency and robbing people of their humanity. Yet even in its sadness, Least Heat-Moon implies, there is something authentic, as if to say these forgotten people deserve to be remembered.

Red Histories: American Routes, Native American Roots

Least Heat-Moon’s second major question—what constitutes an American?—is rooted in the midcentury efforts of Moses and other national architects to redirect infrastructure in an effort to reshape Americans. This thread of the text is largely an investigation of race, ethnicity, and the evolution of American labor. *Blue Highways* begins similarly to *On The Road*: facing divorce and unemployment, Least Heat-Moon is the picture of modern discontent.⁹³ He views mobility as a way to counter feelings of powerlessness—“A man who couldn’t make things go right, could at least go” (3)—and the road has a particular draw: “The temptation of the American highway,” he writes, is “the true journey of an Odysseus or Ishmael or Gulliver or even a Dorothy of Kansas, wherein the passage of space and time becomes only a metaphor of a movement through the interior of being” (188). He imagines a remedy to personal stagnation.

⁹³ Suffering declining enrollment, the university where he teaches cannot renew his contract. He also learns that his wife, from whom he has been separated for nine months, is now living with “her ‘friend’—Rick or Dick or Chick” (3).

What separates *Blue Highways* from the transformative individualism of *On The Road*, however, is Least Heat-Moon's collective effort to understand America's racial history alongside the development of oil culture. Least Heat-Moon is what he describes as "mixed-blood": part native Siouan and part European-American.⁹⁴ In a significant departure from previous road narratives (written predominantly by middle- or upper-class white men), his investigative method leads to more genuine contact with the people and places he travels through. Unlike Sal—whose contact with people and places is typically exploitative—Least Heat-Moon is concerned with understanding his position in relationship to the world he inhabits. His own personal regeneration is invariably intertwined with understanding how race inflects identity. He notes that on the day of his departure, he has "seen thirty-eight Blood Moons, an age that carries its own madness and futility. With a desperate sense of isolation and growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of place where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected" (5). This feeling—of being American but living in an "alien land"—carries significant weight. Moon's lack of fulfillment comes from more than just dissatisfaction with suburban America: it is rooted in a sense of displacement that hearkens back to Lewis and Clark's trek across the "*terra incognita*," when white colonists first began planning the very routes and networks that evolved into the Interstate Highway System (6). While traveling through Oregon along the Columbia River—the same route as Lewis and Clark—he recalls atrocities white colonists inflicted upon native tribes: *The Lady Washington*, Duncan McDougal's smallpox threat, or the tenuous marriage treaty between Americans and the Chinook tribes in Washington (224-226). He recalls Walt Whitman's words, that the universe is "a vast

⁹⁴ Least Heat-Moon's father is Siouan, a collection of various tribes along the western bank of the Mississippi River including the Crow, Hidatsa, Lakota, and Otoe. Siouan lands stretched from northern Arkansas and Missouri, northwest into Minnesota and the Dakotas. His mother, whom he does not reference in *Blue Highways*, was of Anglo decent.

similitude” that “interlocks us” (241). Though Least Heat-Moon continues to search for harmony, he begins to recognize that harmony may function differently than he had anticipated. “The nature of things is resistance to change,” he writes, “while the nature of process is resistance to stasis, yet things and process are one, and the line from inorganic to organic and back again is uninterrupted and unbroken” (241). Here, we see self-commentary: realizing his own journey as rooted in resistance to universal entropy, he likens his life to that of nature. Harmony, perhaps, is not personal contentment so much as it is one’s role within the unbroken line that is birth, death, and rebirth. “Things” and “process” are first positioned against one another, but Least Heat-Moon breaks down the binary into a more complex, ecological approach to existence. Though he reveres Whitman’s optimistic, egalitarian verse, he recognizes that the world that all things inhabit is entropic by nature (241).

Over time, *Blue Highways* reveals that questions of authenticity—what is America?, or what does it mean to be an American?—are integrally connected. The evolving infrastructure of the American highway and national discourses of racial conflict remain vitally intertwined, representations of entropic and negentropic patterns. In avoiding urban areas (which is a goal throughout the text), Least Heat-Moon misses some stories. Upon entering Alabama, an old man asks what he thought of Atlanta. “Trying to stay out of the cities,” he replies. “Not seeing the South then. Better go back,” says the old man (92). The implication here is not that Atlanta itself is solely representative of the South, but rather that in avoiding the cities Least Heat-Moon does not fully encounter the history of racial conflict associated with the South. “Drove a city bus in Atlanta to pay for my schooling,” the man tells him, a MARTA bus, which he refers to as “Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta” (92). These buses provide mobility, but also facilitate de facto segregation through white flight: “the blacks—you know, the domestics living

in Buttermilk Bottom, the goddamn ghetto—they take buses to the suburbs to clean houses.... Why don't y'all git youah fuckin' eyes off the darlin' belles' butts and go ovah to Selma?" (92-93).

More importantly, he *does* go to Selma: he changes course. Least Heat-Moon's "alternative subjectivity" emerges because he does more than record anthropological experiences: he lets those experiences influence his relationship to the world he inhabits. In Selma, he is seen as an outsider: "Yankee Half-Breed," to the white racist drunk Ray, while the black student-activist James Walker sees him as "white dude in the project" (96-102). Least Heat-Moon asks both men what has changed since the 1965 SCLC march: "Way we do bidness," says Ray; "three words," Walker says, "Ain't nothin' changed." The varying responses are reflective of the two men but convey a disparate interpretation of civil rights progress. Most surprising: Least Heat-Moon is accused of tourism, a troubling allegation for someone so observant and empathic.⁹⁵ He attempts to empathize and to understand, but he does not have the experiential data required to establish the collective union he desires. Though he does not always recognize as much, it becomes clear that the quick, terminal access the highway accelerates the entropic impulses Least Heat-Moon resists.

The most productive moments in *Blue Highways* occur when Least Heat-Moon questions his motivations for the journey. He stumbles across a line from Black Elk, who proclaims "the blue road is the route of 'one who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than for his people'" (219). This strikes him to his core: not only is his wandering method questioned but he learns of other American Indians who have, at times, felt similarly to himself. He wonders, "Was it racial memory that urged me to drive seven thousand miles of blue

⁹⁵ In fact, I would claim that acting *against* what we might imagine as the "touristic impulse" is one of Least Heat-Moon's central projects throughout the text.

highway?” (219). His feelings of disillusionment are not unique; in fact, Native Americans across the nation have been working to reconcile similar feelings for more than four hundred years. How can he expect revelation through colonial routes, rather than Native roots? He is driven to the highway in an attempt to find himself; yet, the more valuable project over the course of the text is the resolution of the disparate racial, anthropological, and ecological narratives he encounters. As these conflicts continue, the text’s ecological and anthropological interests outweigh his need for personal renewal. He criticizes the Odyssean paradigm: “a true journey,” he writes, “no matter how long the travel takes, has no end” (188). Here, we see the clearest manifestation of his developing resistance to American highway culture: there is no end, no destination at which one finally achieves personal transcendence. A life’s work is to approach different versions of understanding. Tracing his route at the end of the text, he recognizes the Hopi symbol of life and renewal, the “labyrinth of migration” (406). Bryzik explains how Least Heat-Moon’s “initial reliance on ‘mapped reality’” gives way to “symbolic and experiential... narrative maps” inspired and informed by the physical world (670). *Blue Highways*’ winding, labyrinthine journey along the least direct routes across America manifests as an ancient insurrection. By the end of his journey, the travel guides and categories that frame the earlier portions of the road trip are overshadowed by the maps of nature and ethnic history.

Race and the Motorcycle: Alternative Driving in South of Haunted Dreams

Ghost Dancing complicates Least Heat-Moon’s critiques of petromodernity. The van ties him to the road, yet at the same time it functions as a counter-weight to the dominant early themes in road literature: transformative individualism, speed pleasure, and secure identity. This is at least in part due to Least Heat-Moon’s ecosensitivity, a manifestation of his petroanxiety

signified by his aversion to the Interstate Highway System. Least Heat-Moon is critical of petromodernity's (a)effects on America and Americans, but underpinning *Blue Highways* is a latent fear of oil's vast environmental consequences. His distaste for tractor-trailers belching exhaust, for the remnants of industry that litter deserts and mountainsides, and for the construction of more roads all presciently anticipate environmental crises that emerge with national and global force in the 1990s. Eddy Harris' memoir *South of Haunted Dreams* is not outwardly environmental: he does not seek out natural spaces as Least Heat-Moon does, and he does not drive a van as a way of encouraging open discourse. The text chronicles Harris' road trip across the American South in search of racial and familial history. For Harris, born and raised in Missouri, the South represents a "mythic reality": a place known for its "largess" and "gentility" but deeply rooted in "violence" and "injustice" (14-15). The Harris family has roots in the South—great-great-great grandfather Joseph Harris was a slave in Virginia and a freedman in Tennessee—but Harris himself has never crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. "The South has dictated and defined us," Harris writes; "the South, more even than the wild wild West, more in fact than any other region, is responsible for who we are as a people and as a nation. Since the very beginning the South has compromised us" (15). He wants to understand this history first-hand. I claim *South of Haunted Dreams* emphasizes the same latent ecological anxieties that underpin *Blue Highways*. Harris is ultimately interested in his family history and, by proxy, the racial history of the South. By exploring this history, he hopes to better understand how racism functions throughout the nation.

Thus, Harris rides a blue BMW motorcycle and enters the South angry, ready to face a regional history of racial injustice he has only previously encountered in stories. Though the story of the American road trip is the story of the car, the motorcycle is a concurrent

phenomenon, an acceleration of the freedom myths the car symbolizes. It is faster than the car, with less inhibition but more danger. If the car signals personal mobility, the motorcycle refines mobility to the individual. The design (which of course varies from bike to bike) accounts for one body; passengers, while possible, interfere with the driver. The physical integration with the machine requires precise anticipations and reactions from the biker—though we see certain drivers with prowess behind the wheel (Dean Moriarty being the primary example), the car allows for inaccuracies the motorcycle does not. The biker must anticipate the road, shifting the weight of the bike with the body through curves and turns. Compared to a car, the motorcycle accelerates and brakes with ease, with engine power equivalent to a car but significantly reduced mass. Nothing separates the driver from the windy world, which heightens the senses and increases the stakes. Where the car is forgiving, the motorcycle is ruthless. These characteristics are not departures from the car—or rather, what the car symbolizes. They are, more accurately, intensifications of the affectual qualities of driving. The bike focuses the pleasures of driving through the simplest framework, reducing the material inhibitors between the body and speed pleasure. As the text unfolds (or, as Harris’ initial anger abates), Harris’ anthropological engagements become more productive: when he fosters communal affect, the road itself becomes less important than the effects of the road on Americans at large. Here, I claim Harris recognizes that the infrastructures of late-oil-petrochemical-capitalism perpetuate structures of racial injustice and, further, spread those injustices subtly beyond regional boundaries. Roads and highways disseminate racist ideologies that Harris initially associates with the South throughout the nation.

Thompson claims the “motorcycle outlaw was as uniquely American as jazz. Nothing like them had ever existed. In some ways they appeared to be a kind of half-breed anachronism,

a human hangover from the era of the Wild West. Yet in other ways they were as new as television. There was absolutely no precedent, in the years after World War II, for large gangs of hoodlums on motorcycles, reveling in violence, worshipping mobility and thinking nothing of riding five hundred miles on a weekend” (64). And for the most part, depictions of bikers in contemporary media or pop culture are depictions of the motorcycle outlaw. But the history of the biker, and therein the history of alternative drivers is more complex than the OMC might have us believe. Juan Suarez explains that postwar MCs were not always made up entirely of veterans, nor were they embedded within criminality. Rather, postwar MCs were most closely associated with emergent youth cultures dissatisfied with the “internal tensions, structures, and regulations from which some escaped riding, forming groups cemented around machines and movement” (118). Like other oil-powered subcultures, bikers viewed mobility as a form of social protest: “Movement was a way to reject the reorganization and normalization of life after the war, with its conformist, settled lifestyle. In the social and ideological changes brought by the end of the war, the bikers’ constant drifting internalized the ideological instability and uncertainty of the period” (Suarez, 118). Biker subculture and the growth of the motorcycle industry indicates an increasing petroanxiety about forms of surveillance, government regulation, and structures of hegemonic power. This anxiety, I claim, is only made more evident by the realization of environmental toxicity: a tangible catastrophe on global scales. These manifestations of petroanxiety, though integrally linked to the independent nature of the motorcycle, are not dependent upon the criminality of biker subculture. Bikers were portrayed as the “bad” drivers lacking the romantic, heroic qualities attached to The Bandit or Snowman in *Smokey and the Bandit*. When Snowman runs over a fleet of motorcycles outside a gas station midway through *Smokey and the Bandit*, there is a sense of triumphant and retribution. Snowman

is rough around the edges, but deep down he is a family man doing what he does best: trucking. Further, his transport (moving Coors beer) is more than a forgivable offense: he is fighting a regulation that audience members would also be incensed with. Unlike bikers, who run guns or deal drugs, Snowman's social disobedience is romantic, a modern truck-driving Robin Hood. When the bikers beat him up in a gas station bar, he is detached from the bikers' more serious criminality. When he wrecks their bikes, he ruins the bikers' mobility *and* protects the people from dangerous criminals. However, the attraction to motorcycles is filtered through the bike itself. For Harris, particularly, the bike holds similar mechanical and mobile attractions, but also begins to reveal public perception of alternative drivers. Criminality is a byproduct of the failing pursuit of material satisfaction; Harris, who has no connection to the OMC and is in no way a "motorcycle outlaw," realizes the bike in ways obfuscates his exploration of racial history. The public identifies the biker and biker subculture more generally through the bike itself: the rebellious machine that promises satisfaction outside normative culture.

South of Haunted Dreams observes subtle methods for how/why petrocultures obfuscate race, most notably in the commercialization of affective possibilities of speed and personal freedom that plot a major thread through many American post-war road narratives. In light of recent struggles attacking petro-capitalism through infrastructure (the Standing Rock conflicts or Black Lives Matter highway protests in Minneapolis, Memphis, and Sacramento), recognizing oil-petrochemical capitalism as fundamental to institutions of racialized structures of power in the late twentieth century may seem obvious.⁹⁶ Like Civil Rights Movement activists, contemporary protests against environmental toxicity and racial injustice target the petroleum infrastructure: in disrupting the flow of oil or oil commerce, activists are able to call attention to

⁹⁶ These contemporary examples are not new, by any means. Petrocapitalism has historically been a target of civil rights protests—again, the Montgomery Bus Boycott is a telling example.

the ways in which petro-infrastructures facilitate modern injustices. But the ways in which hierarchies of discriminatory power are reinforced within petroculture are not always so easily discernable. Harris' blue BMW motorcycle, for example, symbolizes a version of highway freedom myths that attract disillusioned moderns while at the same time redirect the focus of interpersonal experiences away from racial discourse to veneration of the motorcycle. The machine easily commercializes mobility, allowing onlookers the impression that they too could buy the opportunity to "ride around the country... free as the wind" (186). And yet: in spite of the motorcycle's predisposition towards individualism, bikes are deeply associated with camaraderie shared only between other bikers. Other bikers wave to him on the highway or ride alongside him, no matter what their politics may be (184). Even observers who are *not* bikers follow suit. Harris is nervous and suspicious when a police officer in Hartford, KY approaches him. Harris assures the reader he has done nothing wrong, his actions completely within the law, expecting animosity from the officer. Instead, the officer talks to him about the bike. "Sure is a pretty thing," he says before wishing him safe travels (49). Much later in the text, another police officer, a motorcycle officer this time, insists that Harris ride his bike for a couple of miles to compare the two machines. They ride to a café down the highway, where the officer buys him lunch (248). Harris describes the bike as a unifier of sorts, one that supersedes other classifications of race, gender, or class: "There is a special camaraderie amongst motorcyclists. You are part of a family.... The kinship crosses barriers we normally erect. You are a motorcyclist whether man or woman, black or white or brown, local or foreign" (184). The motorcyclist is not defined by gender, race, or nationalism, but rather by the machine.

While this seems equalizing initially, it obstructs the collective experiential contact so necessary to Harris' work. The bike functions as an intermediary between Harris and the world

he contacts. People see the bike, recognize what it symbolizes, and only then approach the driver. They are not interested in Harris himself, but rather what the motorcycle implies. The admiration turns sour and becomes envy: Harris has achieved what they cannot—independence and individual freedom. Though the “camaraderie” seems to span racial boundaries, it also erases the individual. “Always the bike,” he bemoans, as if to say the machine is more approachable than himself, a black man (240). The bike legitimizes the driver at the expense of the person. This is troubling for Harris, as the core of his journey is in human interaction. As a black man traveling the South, where lack of mobility was emblematic of African American struggles throughout slavery and Jim Crow, Harris wants to equate his mobility with a grander message about race in America. “If I had my choice,” he says, “I would pick my route solely by the scents on the breezes and I would ride carefree along those old roads forever. It is freedom I seek. Plain, simple and glorious. Freedom *from*, certainly, from time and from place, but as well freedom *to*, freedom to go, to do, freedom to be” (106). He is not limited to the boundaries of the plantation or forced to the side of the road to make way for white travelers. In fact, Harris has achieved a mobility no other African American in his genealogy can realize. Remembering his great-great-grandfather Joseph’s migration from Virginia to Tennessee, Harris says, “Despite the speed of stagecoach and rail, however, they could not do in a month what I on the bike could do in a day” (239). That kind of mobility should reflect a similar trend of social freedom that rises above racial signifiers. However, Harris at times recognizes this inequality: “there is no such thing as real freedom, especially no freedom for a black man” (106). In the moments when the bike seems to transcend his blackness, he is not defined by race because he is not recognized at all. He is seen and perceived through the machine. “Perhaps race will always determine the roads we travel,” he wonders, and perhaps the vehicles by which we travel them.

The mechanistic dissolution of race, gender, and class identification is at odds with an earlier moment when Harris celebrates the “joys of solitude.” Here, Harris explores a more productive recognition of his blackness by visualizing his own body within his material world:

When I am alone I am not black. I am not tall. I am not deformed. I am not ugly. When I am alone, I am nothing more than a voice whispering, a mind wandering, a spirit soaring. There is just a hint of brown at the corners of my sight. If I move my eyes down I can see the brown skin under my nose. I can see the black shadow of my mustache. But unless I lift my arms or move my head and look down at myself, I am colorless, shapeless, two eyes looking out, and yet utterly whole and perfect. An abstraction. A thought. An idea. When I am alone, without other men’s opinions of me, without their eyes attempting to define me, without the ways they treat me, their reactions to me, their fear and their loathing and their disgust, even their kindness, without other men I am simply me. (93)

When alone, Harris is defined by his own cognition, by his own vision and physical/mental being. He controls the physical movements of his body, the path of his vision. The “brown skin” under his nose, the “black shadow” of his mustache are peripheral. Solitude does not eliminate Harris’ blackness, but it forces a process of recognition wherein he is not defined by race. Solitude does not divert observation away from sociocultural qualifiers that, otherwise, define his place within the world he inhabits. Rather, it *requires* recognition through a shift in visibility and, therein, identity. However, this sort of normative form of subjectivity, the abstract, incorporeal form of personhood around which US forms of citizenship developed have long been racialized white and gendered male. Solitude requires a shift in visibility for the self; however, the bike reveals the ways in which others perceive his citizenship and prompts Harris to approach his anthropological interactions through different forms of recognition.

Take, for instance, the story of Atlantic Beach, South Carolina, as remembered by Eleanor Tate, an artist and writer whom Harris meets when he turns south down the Atlantic coast. Atlantic Beach lies on the northern boundary of Myrtle Beach, a popular American beach destination since the late nineteenth century. Domestic tourism surged in the early-twentieth century, particularly during World War I—however, segregation prevented blacks from vacationing at white beaches or white resorts. As tourism increased through the 1920s, George Tyson realized the need for a black resort. In the 1930s, Tyson bought some acreage north of Myrtle Beach and began constructing a resort that would cater to wealthy blacks along the coast.⁹⁷ Tyson was unable to keep hold of the land over the course of the Depression and the resort was purchased by a group of black doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Between 1940 and 1970, Atlantic Beach was a haven for black families, a place of relative luxury where nationally known entertainers performed, but most importantly, where “blacks could relax and vacation without insult or racial harassment” (Harris, 195). In the 70s, Atlantic Beach started a slow decline. The town, Tate explains, was decimated by integration as black businesses were not prepared to compete with the white resorts in the area.⁹⁸ “As soon as it was all right to go to the white hotels,” Tate asks, “who could be bothered with the black ones?” (196). Tourism declined over the 70s and 80s and the town fell into financial ruin. Tate’s history ends there, though

⁹⁷ Atlantic Beach is not listed in *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* because, from what I can tell, it did not need to be identified as black-friendly. *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, a travel guide that began publishing in 1936, identified black-friendly establishments along the country’s tourist thoroughfares. In an editor’s note to composer Victor Green, William Smith the *Green-Book* “is a book badly needed among our Race since the advance of the motor age. Realizing the only way we knew where and how to reach our pleasure resorts was in a way of speaking, by word of mouth, until the publication of ‘The Negro Motorist Green-Book.’... We earnestly believe ‘The Negro Motorist Green-Book’ will mean as much if not more to us as the A.A.A. means to the white race” (Green, 2). Atlantic Beach was well known for catering specifically to black patrons. The date of publication could also be a factor: the first version of the *Green-Book* was published in 1936, but Atlantic Beach did not gain in popularity until after World War II.

⁹⁸ Similar phenomenon occurred throughout the country, i.e. Farish Street in Jackson, Mississippi or Michigan Ave. in Detroit.

Harris notes she continues to work towards “something to uplift them [other residents] so they could be better off, spiritually and physically” (196). Residents facing financial crisis desperately sought new attractions that would bring in tourists but also preserve Atlantic Beach’s black history.⁹⁹

In an effort to gain stability amidst the economic turmoil brought on by exclusion, Atlantic Beach took on a new symbol: the motorcycle. The Atlantic Beach Bikefest was modeled after mid-century Harley Davidson rallies in neighboring Myrtle Beach that were exclusively white (as was much of biker subculture in the immediate postwar era). The festival was first imagined in 1980 as a collaborative effort between City Councilman John Skeeters and the Carolina Knight Riders MC to invigorate the economy and maintain cultural independence from surrounding white neighborhoods. The rally would generate much needed revenue but would also offer a distinctly black alternative to discriminatory rallies in surrounding townships. While there was some dispute as to the nature of the rally (residents wanted a wide “social event” while bikers imagined something more exclusive), Bikefest quickly gained in popularity, exceeding sixty thousand participants by 1997. P. Nicole King explains, the “festival offers hope for the town both because the event permits Atlantic Beach to act as a location for the growth and diversification of African American leisure culture, and because it brings back the lively, crowded streets, blasting music, and sidewalk vendors so fondly recollected by early inhabitants of the town” (150). The Black Pearl (as Atlantic Beach was nicknamed) was known for lively recreation; what is more lively or loud than a motorcycle rally?

⁹⁹ Additionally, the state took on some of the town’s debt. A short periodical piece I found showed that by the early 2000s, Atlantic Beach had regained enough financial security to warrant Standard and Poor’s analysis, that Atlantic Beach had a “stable outlook” and would “maintain a sound fiscal position and manageable debt burden” in the future (Bond Buyer, 29).

It is probable that Harris visited Atlantic Beach because of Bikefest. Not only would he be aware of the festival as a motorcyclist, but throughout the 1990s Bikefest became increasingly controversial within the surrounding white communities. The festival drew criticism for reasons that were discriminatory, rooted in the region's segregated history. As the event grew, reports of "public nudity, drug activity, what appeared to be a stabbing and a near riot" earned Bikeweek a reputation for being unruly and out of control (King, 154). However, there had been no stabbing and no riot; King explains the number of incidents did not warrant the massive outcry from nearby Myrtle Beach (154). Many surrounding residents were particularly upset by the noise of the festival—young black bikers had moved from the Harley to louder, faster Japanese bikes (King, 169). This was in part due to speed pleasures, but was certainly a commentary on class and race as well: imported Japanese bikes were cheaper than Harley's and were not associated with the largely white, racist OMCs of the 1950s and 1960s. White residents complained this was proof that black youth partied "differently" and made "more noise than their white counterparts" (153). The noise of the bike disrupts racist narratives, a "metaphor for the nation's descent from an imagined bygone era of race relations, when blacks knew their place and were deferential to whites" (King, 153). Black bikers "roared through barriers in the *de facto* segregation of the region's leisure space," reclaiming Atlantic Beach amidst furious attempts at hostile takeover (153). Bikers were separated by the motorcycles themselves. The machine, historically a symbol of cultural dissidence, became a new way of framing racial conflict: white motorcycle rallies, AMA rallies, had become largely acceptable throughout the Grand Strand while Bikefest remained a target (169).

King aptly explains Atlantic Beach and the motorcycle as an example of how racist ideology "travels with new technologies" (154). Atlantic Beach represents a collective effort to

redefine minority identity through oil; however, petro-infrastructures reassert the very structures of power that increased personal mobility ought to counter. Notably, King identifies this as a strategy to consolidate power that goes beyond just racial modifiers. The controversies surrounding Bikefest are not simply issues of race, but rather a “larger trend in southern (and American) politics” prejudiced against “age, class, sexuality, and taste” (155). As Harris recognizes during his travels, the motorcycle is a framework through which his humanity goes unrecognized, mediated by technology instead of social ethics. This remains true as long as his “alternative driving” remains within the boundaries of the AMA or TMC: publicly acceptable versions of motorcycling. Once the framework moves beyond the publicly (also white) acceptable model, the bikers are associated with OMC criminality. Even when all signs indicate Atlantic Beach’s Bikefest participants are *not* “motorcycle outlaws.”

The success of Black Bike Week shows, if nothing else, that the history of Atlantic Beach is the history of minority mobility. The influence of petroculture via road building is profoundly impactful in redistributing wealth and population. Atlantic Beach is reminiscent of other mid-century resort towns—such as Salton Sea, CA or Grossinger, NY or the individual self-sustaining communities memorialized in Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita*. These luxury spaces were connected by the earliest state highway systems constructed in the 1920s, maintained through the Depression, and finally allowed to flourish during the spike in domestic tourism after World War II.¹⁰⁰ Though certainly billed as escapes from metro areas, these resort towns were by no means inaccessible, as each offered unique attractions: Salton Sea advertised desert comfort along the

¹⁰⁰ In fact, some (like Salton Sea) were constructed even earlier, alongside transcontinental railroads. However, in *Thelma and Louise*, we see the Thelma and Louise drive an access road or frontage road: roads that parallel interstate highways but were often part of the local road system before the interstate came in. The camera shoots from a high vantage point, capturing the smaller road in between (on screen left) the railroad and (on screen right).

most desolate portion of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Grossinger marketed a sportsman's retreat from New York City, and Atlantic Beach promoted a uniquely black beach town. But what makes Atlantic Beach such an interesting case study comparatively is specifically its placement within modern oil capitalism and the community's racial purposefulness. In 1968, North Myrtle Beach annexed coastline surrounding Atlantic Beach, but residents refused incorporation. Why, after years of exclusion and distrust, would Atlantic Beach suddenly accept invitation into the once-homogenous white beach community? After all, the town had developed in response to oppressive segregation and much of the culture cultivated over decades arose out of direct response to Jim Crow. Residents like Tate refused to sacrifice a notable black space to the white communities that had historically ostracized them, knowing that annexation would require a distinct "whitening" of their community. Rejecting annexation, however, carried serious consequences, particularly regarding the infrapolitics throughout the region. Highways to the south run primarily through Myrtle Beach. After the consolidation of North Myrtle Beach, highways skimmed the western border of Atlantic beach en-route to North Myrtle Beach, essentially cutting Atlantic Beach off from coastal tourism. Harris immediately comments on Atlantic Beach's roads, which are "rutted" and difficult to navigate compared to the highways he is used to (194). The disrepair of Atlantic Beach's roads signals its absence from the infrastructural and economic network of the region. "It is not a very pretty place," Harris writes, "dusty streets with no sidewalks. The grass at the edge of the roads has been worn completely away. Broken bottles in the streets.... Too many broken down cars" (194). The further Atlantic Beach is separated from the surrounding infrastructure, the more the roads that actually do allow access into the town fall into increasing disrepair, and the town becomes what Tate recognizes as a space distinctly bounded from local and national economies. This form of racial discrimination,

which is very different from Harris' initial expectations of the South, is among the most subtle and insidious in the text.

The Harris Methodology: Racial History, Communal Affect, and Travel Shifts

Harris' project of racial and familial history is important because it indicates a shift from the road as a space for individual transcendence and carves out liberated space for certain groups excluded from and by roadways. *South of Haunted Dreams* follows a similar pattern to *Blue Highways*, though Harris' approach towards communal affect begins with less altruistic intentions. That is not to say Harris is uninvested in the lives of those he encounters (he very much is) but comparably his methodology retains an antagonism that stems from the South's role in the nation's history of racial injustice. Throughout *South of Haunted Dreams*, the highway exists in two manifestations (related to Least Heat-Moon's distinction between interstate highways and blue highways, though implemented differently): first, as an avenue by which we (or Harris) witness the resiliency of the South's racist past; and second, as a physical/geographical representation of the dissemination and consumption of ideologies, particularly over regional and national spaces. Harris largely does not encounter the exterior signs of racism he identifies with the South: segregation, racial slurs, lynching, or open hostility from whites. Rather, he discovers a complex network of people—black and white; waiters, farmers, housewives, artists, retirees, and college undergraduates—who are more willing to engage the South's racist history than he had imagined. When Harris speaks of the South as region, he refers both to the history of slavery and Jim Crow (and the resultant legacy of racial conflict) and to the apparent resistance to modernization that, for outsiders, continues to define the region. Like Least Heat-Moon, however, he feels he must see and experience the place for

himself: “I know what the South was once,” Harris writes. “I do not know what the South has become” (97). Harris hopes to educate himself; further, he expresses optimism for change, hope that the South does not match his preconceptions. For Harris, the highway is not simply a space for personal exploration and individualism but a network through which to reconstruct and perhaps rewrite America’s racial history. The Harris family has roots in the South—great-great-great grandfather Joseph Harris was a slave in Virginia and a freedman in Tennessee—but Harris himself has never crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. The purpose of his road trip, then, is to better understand where racial conflict stems from and, if possible, how progress might occur. By altering his contact with place and people, Harris hopes to “confront the source” of his anger—to “find a new South, a new America” (22).

Harris begins *South of Haunted Dreams* with racial violence. He references Emmett Till, Lamar Smith, Medgar Evers, the Groveland Four, and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. His own father recounts an experience in 1934, when a group of white southerners in Kentucky threatened to drown him in the Ohio River. He met a young black girl named Sally Ann, who had been “claimed” by white men; “Don’t you know who she belongs to?” they ask (20). Harris’ father “left town on the next bus to anywhere” (20). However, the racial conflicts Harris encounters manifest quite differently than he expects. In the very opening of the book, Harris speeds towards the Daviess County Coon Hunters Club, ready to face down “a bunch of big-bellied rednecks sitting around an old wood-burning stove. They will be chewing tobacco and wearing caps advertising seed corn and tractors, and transmission companies. And they will be drinking beer, of course, telling stories and dreaming about the good old days, dreaming about lynching niggers” (24). When he finally crests a hollow and spies the clubhouse—an empty

“concrete box”—he finds the “place is deserted” (24).¹⁰¹ Later, Harris attempts to chase down a speeding semi-truck with a Confederate flag on the grill. The driver swerves to miss Harris, who is pulled off to the side of the highway, horn blaring as the “lumbering monster lurched and clattered” past. Harris is upset with the man’s driving, but the Confederate flag on the grill is particularly infuriating because it signifies history of racism he is hoping to confront. Harris never catches up with the driver (he loses him at an Interstate junction). These two early confrontations illustrate Harris’ earliest methodology, one that he admits angry and confrontational, but is also unproductive (22-23).

Like many travel narratives, the traveler’s earliest expectations shift with experience on the road. Least Heat-Moon’s initial pursuit of harmony in *Blue Highways*, for instance, transforms into something more akin to anthropological and ecological exploration. Harris experiences a similar reformation wherein early attempts to force the South to fit a specific representation yield to a greater willingness to absorb the stories and lives of the people and places he interacts with. Rather than pursuing “kicks” like Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, Harris opts for knowledge and collective empathy. In Raleigh, North Carolina, Harris spends an afternoon with Andrew, a gas station attendant. Harris explains how racism functions, a series of actions that constitute systemic discrimination, while Andrew listen with occasional interjections.¹⁰² “I’m not an educated man,” Andrew admits, “I just work in a gas station, for God’s sake. I don’t think about these things” (120). Harris helps Andrew to “think of these things.” At the same time, Andrew informs Harris’ views and encourages a different type of

¹⁰¹ In Charleston, Harris believes he will face down the worst horrors of slavery at the old Slave Market but finds that even it has been anesthetized. Ultimately, Harris writes, “Worse than racism itself is believing in racism and affirming it, losing yourself, letting racist ways and racist thinking define who you are and what you think and feel, until instead of acting, you can only react” (173).

¹⁰² Harris makes a long analogy about the St. Louis Cardinals ballpark and the way seating remained segregated within the stadium even in the years after the Civil Rights Movements (117-121)

observation. Harris admits that his perception of racism in the South is based upon minor misconceptions: “All I know about the South is its history.... Its hatred and its injustice. And everyday on this road I see how the South is doing all it can to hold on to its racist past. Rebel flags and little reminders all over the place. And I know too that if I’m going to get to the soul of the South, first I have to encounter the dark heart of this racist past” (121). Andrew simply shakes his head and replies, “You’re missing so much more” (121). Echoing Least Heat-Moon’s shift in method after avoiding Atlanta, Harris spends less time *telling* people how racism functions and *listening* to their stories, to others’ experiences. Harris asks Gwendoline, a young black woman in rural Goochland County, Virginia, “How are the white folks treating you?” “The white folks?” Gwendolyn responds, questioningly. She smiles at him and before Harris can expound on his leading question, Gwendolyn explains, we “maybe will get some flare-ups now and again, but that’s just a desperate try by some people to hang on to what’s not theirs anyway. There is no going back” (161). Like Least Heat-Moon, Harris begins his journey with his own conceptions of space and place, but he is willing to adjust and reshape these presumptions according to experience. In perhaps the most important project in the text, Harris traces the footsteps of his great-great-great grandfather Joseph Harris, a slave in Virginia legally manumitted in 1832 (134). Joseph, a skilled laborer who “made and mended harnesses,” slowly moved west into Tennessee, where he operated a stagecoach line and owned 317 acres of land (145). He visits Harris Hill, where Joseph was buried, and traces the rest of his genealogy. Following Joseph Harris’ path helps to connect him to both the place and his past, as these histories weigh heavily on his interpersonal experiences throughout the text.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Harris makes clear that he is not a product of Jim Crow. Where his father might run, “suddenly a coward,” he writes, Harris himself has no intention of running away. Rather, he represents a new generation intent on confronting those histories: “I am not my father, not of my father’s generation. I was not tempered in the kiln of Jim Crow. I was instead forged in a new furnace, hammered out of a new tradition—wholly connected to the old,

The most important distinction I think readers can make between the text itself and the narrator's experiences is in the shifting depictions of racism. The types of injustice Harris rails against cannot simply be understood as southern problems: these are *national* problems. Harris' home, St. Louis (which he does acknowledge has a long history of racism and segregation) is, with New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles, one of the more significant examples of postwar/post-Civil Rights segregation through highway building. East St. Louis (also segregated from St. Louis by the Mississippi River) has significantly less highway access to downtown St. Louis than the suburbs to the west of the city. The very infrastructure of the post-war economic boom was often routed through poor, non-white neighborhoods (seen in New York City, but also Baltimore, Los Angeles, and East St. Louis). In *Folklore of the Freeway*, Alex Avila explains that highway building, in the name of downtown redevelopment, served as a powerful agent of "slum clearance" and "Negro removal" (50). Non-white neighborhoods were targeted for eminent domain because they lacked the political power or economic force to voice protest (50-51). By the early 1990s, nearly 41,000 miles of interstate highway spread across the nation, in addition to an already elaborate web of state and rural highways, many of them planned and constructed alongside historical racial boundaries. The Interstate Highway System is still revered as a testament to technological and humanitarian progress, but the roads and highways that facilitate Harris' movement in the text *and* at home reveal a complex negotiation between economic/industrial/technological progress and racial injustice throughout the late-twentieth century. Interstate highways bisected cities along racial axes or rendered minority neighborhoods inaccessible, cut off from the path of the American economy. Instead of increasing access and

as all tradition must be, but so utterly different" (23). His approach, as a result, is purposefully confrontational. He asks most, if not all, of the Southerners he talks to about their racial politics, how race has personally impacted their lives. Further, he expects vitriolic resistance. "How easy it will be," he writes, "to break the arm of anyone calling me 'boy,' or the neck of someone who calls me a 'nigger'" (23).

generating revenue throughout the inner cities, new infrastructure “isolated and contained poor people of color” or gentrified urban centers, forcing residents to relocate (Avila, 8). This erasure serves a double purpose: it clears residents while simultaneously homogenizing those city spaces.

What Harris renders is more than personal memoir, but a text that posits the social, cultural, and political implications of racism against the economic and technological promises of fossil fuels. Harris (as do many Americans) often views his own mobility as an extension of his freedom, his own father or Joseph, who signify different eras of racial oppression both achieve some level of freedom in their mobility. However, the assumption of free movement and egalitarian contact seemingly inherent in oil is residual from midcentury optimism previously examined throughout *On The Road* and other texts from Chapter One, enthusiastic and expectant texts unable to forecast the developments of corporate oil forty years in the future or unwilling to recognize those developments already occurring in the immediate postwar-era. Like Least Heat-Moon, Harris’ most meaningful critiques come out of those moments when he is able to slow down and engage others’ experiences. Yet, as we see in *Atlantic Beach*, sometimes protest against racial injustice can manifest as an acceleration of the very discriminatory practices that white communities and highway planners in the postwar-era used to perpetuate racist ideologies into our current moment.

The Lower Manhattan Expressway (LME) serves as the pinnacle of “freeway revolt,” but Avila notes that “fighting freeways did not entail a concomitant struggle against the entrenchment of urban racial poverty, it did not challenge the new patterns of racial segregation enacted by highway construction, and it did nothing to secure a more equal footing for African Americans and other peoples of color in the political geography of the city” (51). Further, Avila

explains that “In this shifting geography of wealth and power, race displaced class as the discursive basis of social conflict” (8). *South of Haunted Dreams* indicates how the affective qualities of petroculture obfuscate the tangible consequences of late capitalism implemented through the petroleum infrastructure. Not only does oil-petrochemical-capitalism refocus consumer attention to consolidate power, but the physical infrastructures reshape and reinforce racialized structures of power.

Erika Lopez and the Dissident Biker

In the late 1950s and 60s, a group of Manhattan women protested construction of a highway that would slice through Greenwich Village and Washington Square Park in New York City. The Lower LME, proposed by influential city planner Robert Moses, would have created a large highway stretching across lower Manhattan (an extension of Interstate 78, connecting the Holland Tunnel with the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridges) bisecting the island (Caro, 769). The 1947 New York City Board of Estimate “shifted more than \$21,000,000 in the Moses-dominated Planning Commission’s proposed 1947 capital budget from highways to schools,” delaying Moses’ project (770). In his biography of Moses, Robert Caro notes that as World War II ended, traffic in New York City was the impetus to transform New York’s arterial systems (895-896). Buell similarly explains that industrial shifts towards petrochemicals and automobile production during a “postwar exuberance” made large infrastructural projects seem appropriate (81). Wartime industry had to be redirected; coupled with the vision of suburbia and an explosion of population, rebuilding infrastructure seemed the likeliest outlet. Sara Frohardt-Lane argues that wartime propaganda associated nationalism with responsible driving, “casting public transportation in a more negative light than carpooling,” a rhetorical strategy that had “enduring

effects in the postwar era” (99-104). In 1945, only one-third of New York City residents owned cars; however, the argument was those numbers would increase and the city must be prepared for the future (Caro, 900). Moses’ proposal gained traction through the 1950s alongside the Federal Highways Act of 1956, legislation meant to invigorate and streamline America’s highway systems as Americans purchased more cars requiring higher carrying capacities (Caro, 911). The Eisenhower Interstate System was meant not only to modernize national transportation but to reshape demographics and economics throughout the country. The LME would have acted both as a process of remapping New York City and as a flagship example for how American urban centers—and subsequently the rest of the nation—would participate in U.S. suburbanization.

Protests of the LME stemmed mostly from wealthy, white women led by Jane Jacobs, who decried the loss of cultural history and civilian displacement. The highway itself would require an immense amount of space within the city, meaning over a thousand homes and other buildings must first be demolished. This would require hundreds of businesses shut down abruptly while residents were relocated, often to less desirable spaces. Many families had lived and worked within these neighborhoods for generations; being forcibly removed seemed neither pertinent nor fair, particularly considering that the benefits of the Expressway were ambiguous. The argument was that the Expressway would actually lead traffic more effectively through the city, with easier points of access along the route to foster more profitable businesses in the future. However, for those living along the proposed path at the time, the benefits of the future were irreconcilable with plans for construction. If the Expressway were to revitalize the economies of those neighborhoods, none of the people living there *currently* would see those benefits because they would have been evicted years prior. Many New Yorkers recognized classist motivations behind these recommended highway policies. Moses was accused of using

the LME as a method of renovating what he saw as slum neighborhoods. “Whether by design or not,” Caro writes, “the ultimate effect of Moses’ transportation policies would be to help keep the city’s poor trapped in slums” (901). Support waned as a groundswell of grassroots activism exposed many of these details, making clear to state politicians such as Governor Nelson Rockefeller the immense humanitarian and cultural impacts of a project of this magnitude (1095). Eventually, Jacobs and others gathered enough momentum to kill the LME, yet the impact of Moses’ push towards highways throughout the greater New York City area left a distinct mark: a movement away from public transit and a commitment to the highway. “New highways had a vital function to fulfill,” Caro explains: “the transportation of people and goods that, for whatever reason, had no choice but to use highways” (901). Opposing highway building was (and remains , it seems) a lesson in futility. Caro quotes Lewis Mumford, writing in the *PM*: “Highways are an impressive, flashy thing to build. No one is against highways” (902).

The story of the Cross-Bronx Expressway (CBE) is very different. Though faced with numerous physical difficulties both geographically and infrastructurally, Moses and others pushed construction, tying the Cross-Bronx within a network of 13 other expressways that would reorient New York’s transportation (Caro, 850). There are many reasons the CBE continued construction while the LME was eventually terminated in the planning stages. One reason is the length of the Cross-Bronx: at only seven miles, this particular highway seemed small in comparison to other efforts around the city. Further, it connected major North-South arteries, such as Interstate 95, Major Deegan Expressway, and Harlem River Drive, with Moses’ extensive highways throughout Long Island (843).¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the most notable reason, however,

¹⁰⁴ Caro notes that Moses’ highway projects after WWII cost “over two *billion* dollars” (843). Highway building, as it became more extensive throughout the nation, also became more expensive. One little seven-mile stretch (even if that seven miles was particularly problematic, could not be allowed to disrupt the whole vision.

is the demographic population. Like Greenwich Village, the Bronx had a lot of poor neighborhoods; unlike the Village, much of the population was black—Caribbean or African immigrants and African Americans who had traveled north during the Great Migration. Moses, wielding a power unrivaled by other New York City architects, largely ignored residents, opting for political machinations that minorities had trouble battling in court. As Caro explains, the CBE’s largest impediment was not “the seven miles of brick and mortar and steel and iron that had to be removed” but the seven miles of people forcibly removed in the midst of a city-wide housing crisis (848). Though tenant relocation operations promised comparable living arrangements, many evicted tenants were offered housing that was of lower quality and significantly higher cost—“ancient, filthy, cold, dark tenement and slum warrens”—if they were offered any option at all (862). While many of the city’s residents realized the severity of Moses’ infringement, protest of the CBE never fomented. “In road-building in and around New York,” writes Caro, Moses “had a dictator’s powers,” up until the failure of the LME (848). The CBE served as a warning sign to residents in lower Manhattan, allowing those residents an opportunity to actualize protest, while it also revealed the difficulty many minorities had in voicing opposition to America’s postwar trajectory.

A number of what Avila aptly names “freeway revolts” throughout the 1960s and 70s convey a much larger opposition to what is now widely considered a unilaterally successful public works endeavor, a defining American structure (1-2).¹⁰⁵ Elisheva Blas explains that interstates were regularly built through poorer neighborhoods within urban areas where eminent domain to acquire land was more cost-effective; at the same time, it was easier for those planning highways to demolish infrastructure belonging to citizens who lacked the voice and

¹⁰⁵ As many people have pointed out, President Barack Obama regularly used the Interstate Highway System as an example of positive, bipartisan legislation.

means necessary to resist construction (130). Further, unlike the good roads highways that Augusta and Adeline Van Buren traveled in 1916, interstate highways were first and foremost a *national* vision. The Interstate remapped America along very specific latitudinal/longitudinal routes: a lattice-work that would serve as the structure upon which the nation would branch into the future. These routes were planned by federal and state engineers, many of whom lacked familiarity with the sociocultural politics of areas affected on local levels.¹⁰⁶ Even worse, some planners *were* aware of such consequences, and used those circumstances to further discriminatory politics. As Avila notes, “the dominant narrative of the freeway revolt is a *racialized* story,” one wherein postwar, middle-class Americans championing new highways used narratives of modernizing infrastructure to reinforce racist demographics and further commit minority communities to economic disparity.¹⁰⁷

Erika Lopez enters this discourse in mid-nineties in *Flaming Iguanas* through several unique frameworks. The novel’s main character, Tomato Rodriguez, is a veritable trinity of motoring rebelliousness: a Latina lesbian biker.¹⁰⁸ She lives in New York City but finds her opportunities (or lack thereof) too confining. The social ramifications of her ancestry, class, and sexuality leave her identity fractured: “I don’t feel white, gay, bisexual, black, or like a broken-hearted Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*,” she writes, “but sometimes I feel like all of them” (28). Unlike the bohemian escapists of *On The Road*, Tomato has engaged with and is subject to several layers of hierarchical power that bound and limit her self-image. Highways, specifically,

¹⁰⁶ Though Blas also points out that often local leaders were used to spur the neighborhoods into support.

¹⁰⁷ Avila explains that the new Interstate Highway System was *not* in fact built for already affluent Americans, who were able to lobby successfully against construction in and around their neighborhoods. The highways themselves were meant to, as Blas writes, “smooth the progress of suburbanization.” In other words, the highways helped those white Americans with the potential for economic gain to achieve that potential, while sacrificing any such potential for minority communities, whose homes and businesses were obliterated for incremental economic advancement.

¹⁰⁸ Though, she could not rightly be described as a “biker” initially, Lopez learns to be a biker as the text unfolds.

bind her to certain neighborhoods in New York where poor artists, low-mobility residents, and other Hispanics live. The highway infrastructures that create these boundaries are a lasting by-product of Moses' work at the mid-century to reshape the city and relegate people to specific neighborhoods based upon race and class. Tomato thinks about "death too much"; the motorcycle promises "some sort of control," a chance to focus on living because the machine itself is so dangerous (158-159). She is drawn to biker subculture because of the promise of escape and the rebellious image—she will "be so fucking cool, mirrors and windows will break when we pass by" (1). Like Least Heat-Moon and Harris, her escape is in part geographical and in part ideological. Traveling the country is only part of the road experience: she wants the "swagger" of the bike, the unassailable toughness and unapproachability that comes with being covered in "bug guts" (185). Unlike Least Heat-Moon and Harris, Tomato is outwardly less concerned about fostering communal affect. She hopes other drivers will be intimidated by her appearance, not drawn to her by an air of approachability. Tomato's road methodology is more radical, thus the attraction to biker subculture. Likewise, her own bodily vulnerability, the caustic city environment, and an increasingly unstable global ecology leave her feeling as if she has nothing left to lose. Tomato is beyond 1970s cynicism: her world is not defined by material scarcity, but rather by toxicity, decay, and one's mortality. If anything, Tomato fosters a caustic collectivity emboldened by dissident action, rebellious inclusivity, and the motorcycle. The motorcycle offers different versions of contact and access to untapped power: not simply through the engine, but within her own interiority. Ultimately, Tomato views biker subculture as an opportunity to redefine her image without social restriction: "Really, I want to get this individualistic-thing down" (29).

Throughout the text, Lopez portrays biker subculture as a cultural space in which to encounter different notions of being, in spite of the rigorous racial, gender, and sexual boundaries that dominate the typical MC of the time. By the time of Tomato's road trip in the mid-nineties, the motorcycle had become more accessible to a larger public. Even Harris' use of the bike in the early-nineties (and the fact that he rides a BMW rather than a Harley) indicates an expansion of users. Biker subculture ultimately offers community for cultural dissidents in spite of the MC's predominantly straight, white, male public image.¹⁰⁹ The regulations that govern biker subculture come out of desires for exclusivity, to remain set apart both physically and ideologically. Yet, as Juan Suarez observes, it is the MC's exclusivity that attracts outsiders: even as one is cautioned against "destructive outsidedness," one is simultaneously drawn to "oppositional youth style" (120). Suarez talks in depth about the fashion of biker culture, particularly the leather S&M style, a style that contributes both to the material needs of the biker (leather as a protectant against the asphalt) and the ideological underpinnings of homosocial camaraderie (the use of leather in homoerotic physique magazines) (121). Despite various levels of segregation in club memberships, biker subculture attracts those who already feel excluded. Marginalized voices, like Tomato's, can use the speed and noise of the machine to interject themselves into a world that has otherwise quieted them.

Tomato's sexual identity is the most dominant reason she attaches to biker subculture. Though at the outset of the story she has never had sex with a woman, she considers herself a lesbian and finds herself drawn to women. While many MCs with mid-century roots are known for extreme homophobia, biker subculture has always been streaked with a strong sense of

¹⁰⁹ The Hells Angels have been routinely associated with white power movements, though as an organization they do not officially self-identify as a white supremacist group. Most one-percenter clubs are racially exclusive, with rival clubs developing in response to segregated membership (The Mongols or The Bandidos, for example).

homosociality. During the 1950s and 60s, queer men who could not live out their sexuality publicly found biker subculture to be perfectly insular, self-sustaining social networks that were both heavily masculinized, yet non-normatively homosocial. Bike maintenance was ritual: essential to biker's self-reliance, maintaining one's machine meant spending long hours working with exclusively male counterparts. The garage functioned as a private space where bikers could act without fear of judgement or social reprisal. Kenneth Anger's short experimental film *Scorpio Rising* (1963) chronicles some of these private moments set to a series of early-60s rock songs. The camera follows young men throughout the garage and their private rooms, with snap cuts to scenes of drug use, the ceremonious act of suiting up (wearing mostly leather), and Nazi propaganda. Though non-linear, the film does follow a pattern, beginning with the work (bike maintenance), to personal cosmetic preparations, to partying and physical congress. As the party moves later into the evening, the scenes are more graphic: the characters remove others' clothes, cover genitalia in peanut butter, and engage in oral sex. Anger's film, though it rings with authenticity, does not reflect the public image of MCs during the 50s and 60s, which were largely portrayed as gender exclusive. Women cohabited as sexual objects used to assert power while club activities—commerce, bike maintenance, or fraternization—were strictly for men.¹¹⁰ Through this mid-century period, there is no space for a lesbian biker like Tomato; however, as biker subculture expands through the 1990s, new spaces for othered individuals materialize, particularly for those disillusioned dissidents bent on anti-conformity. Tomato is not imposing but neither is she an imposter. Midway through the novel, she pulls alongside two men wearing

¹¹⁰ There are exceptions, women committed to the club known as "Old Ladies." However, they are not full patch members and no matter their influence, they do not override patch members in the club. Again, the gang rapes in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* or *Hell's Angels* show how the MC attempts to impose a male-dominant hierarchy on the world around them. In other examples, club members would often have women perform public oral sex. But even these moments hint at homoerotic and homophobic tendencies, namely in the public display that demands other men to view them.

cuts on Harley's and, though they will not let her pass them or lead, they accept her momentarily as part of their unit (something Tomato finds extremely pleasing). The sheer fact of her butch identity confirms the masculinity within the subculture while not challenging in any real way the heterosexuality of other biker men.

I want to point out two of Lopez's aesthetic moves, her humor and her illustrations, two stylistic choices Alexandra Ganser claims queers Lopez's work, particularly in comparison to nineties "white, middle-class, heterosexual chick lit" (220). In order to queer the road narrative, Lopez first condemns popular road novels as part of a masculine cultural tradition that claims counter-cultural roots but is, at its core, a renegotiation of the same heteronormative restrictions that define suburban America in the years after WWII. Tomato opposes the bohemian tradition in Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson, and Henry Miller (27). "I could never finish any of the books," she says, "Maybe because I just couldn't identify with the fact that they were guys who had women around to make the coffee and wash the skid marks out of their shorts while they complained, called themselves angry young men, and screwed each other with their existential penises" (27). Tomato wants a road experience that lies outside of masculine exploitation and thus adjacent to soul-searching that dominates midcentury road narratives: "What the fuck was this myth that said you have to leave your job, your life, your tear-stained woman waving goodbye with a kitchen towel behind the screen door so you can ride all over the country with a sore ass...?" (26). In these narratives, mobility is taken *so* seriously that eventually American freedom myths claim being stationary fundamentally opposes a man's innate sense of adventure. Where, in this tradition, is there room for someone like her? On one hand, Tomato wants to subvert the Sals and Deans of earlier road narratives, while on the other hand she secretly yearns for some level of transformative experience. The reality of her adventure is both exhilarating and

uncomfortable. Her desires are at once a product of expectation and a response to expectations. And perhaps in this her movement is different: mobility presents opportunities to cultivate different personae. Whereas categories demand obligation, Tomato's desires shift without inclination. Though she imagines herself as queer, when asked if she is straight or lesbian, she admits she is not entirely certain: "I thought I was both," she says (212). Tomato confronts the fluidity and intersectionality of contemporary identity. At times, she feels transformed through biking, "alive and alone in the best way" but she never approaches the "weathered cowboy with a faint and distant hard-on" (101). Though her adventure derives from a similar escapism—namely the desire to escape definition—Tomato *carves* out space for both the feminine and queer on the road.

This is evident in her focus on the body and sexual desire. Unlike the bohemian narratives she opposes, Tomato does not romanticize or ignore the physical politics of sex. She does not try to seduce a potential lover in a field of prairie flowers where only sagebrush grows. The road is not a place to existentialize queer desire. As the novel progresses, sex becomes a greater focus than the act of biking itself. Rather than relaying the details of the road or tracing the highways she travels, Tomato is more inclined to wonder where she might masturbate (193). In "Girl Power/Grand Prix: Sex, Speed, and the Motorcycle Racer," Katherine Sunderland explains that sometimes "placing the body in the context of speed reifies simplistic gender categories, as speed has a highly gendered cultural history;" yet, at the same time, she claims that "placing the body in the category of speed undoes gender, perhaps even sex, in profound ways because speed in some ways undoes the body" (67). Tomato routinely talks about her body—her tan lines, her "D-cups" and pubic hair—and the physical effects of biking: her throat "like a wet nylon stocking from screaming so much," her "ass" hurting from miles of the "pelvic bone...

trying to cut its way through... to the bike seat” (185). Her bike adapts to her body/the body adapts to the bike, grinding her “crotch into the seat” so her “labia could settle in the little groove it’s made for itself over so many miles” (245). The physicality of petroculture—the melding of body and machine—instigates affectual change and alters her interiority. Her confident swagger comes as much from “sitting with [her] legs open against a two-hundred-mile-per-hour wind,” as it does from her rebellious persona (245). Tomato’s relationships reflect a similar evolution: the feelings of guilt and obligation in the early phases of the novel are replaced with more physical pursuits, particularly with her girlfriend and roommate Hodie at the end of the text. In queering the road trip, Lopez calls attention to repressed homoeroticism throughout the bohemian tradition.¹¹¹ Though Beat writers claimed to be working against such classifications, Tomato sees more value in Erica Jong, “unapologetically running around the world in heat with her panties stretched taut around her ankles” (27). Unlike her predecessors, Tomato will not be “tied to relationships like a dog to a tree / like a tongue to its mouth” (27). Ganser notes that “intertextual recall and critique are... at the core of Lopez’s references to the lesbian movement” (225). In this tradition, Tomato refuses the coy, intellectual Beat voice, opting for a more outspoken and assertive style reminiscent of Jong, Rita Mae Brown, or Dorothy Allison.

The text’s confrontational prose is meant to be loud—like the motorcycle itself, Lopez’s voice demands recognition. *Flaming Iguanas* is a multimodal text, interspersed with short chapters, illustrations, and philosophical interjections that interrupt the chronology of her movement. These moments offer an opportunity to step outside the strict form of the travel narrative. Further, *Flaming Iguanas* plays with romantic, illuminated texts. Not quite a graphic novel, Lopez uses illustrations throughout her work to accompany the prose or record memorable

¹¹¹ Dean, for instance, always eventually reverts back to monogamous dependencies: marriage and family life, where he exerts power as the provider, even if the women in his life often support his inadequacies.

Americana. Often her sketches are simple—a hairbrush, circus performers, a row of Mason’s canning jars. Her most common character is a dark-haired, buxom woman in black stilettos and bustier, reminiscent of World War II pin-up models. The artist seems an amalgam of this woman and early-twentieth century motorcyclists (in fact, the illustration closely resembles Augusta and Adeline Van Buren). Most importantly, the illustrations, like the prose, focus on representations of the body. A triptych on the body aims to attack domesticity while questioning definitions of the body. Each a diagram, the first shows a bare lower-back and buttocks with body parts mislabeled (“buttock” pointing to the forearm and the lower lumbar region marked “shoulder blade”) (163). The second—of a woman’s naked anterior—labels the body correctly (215). The third—of a blender taken apart piece by piece—labels the appliance: the jar a “nipple,” the blade the “navel” (223). Lopez ties taxonomy to commodification of the female body. Like a diagram, domesticity tries to understand/shape/control the subject; however, Lopez interrupts empirical knowledge through personification or by mislabeling. Rather than an accompaniment to the prose, the illustrations often outshine the writing. Particularly in moments of emotional turmoil or distress, the illustrations do work that her prose cannot. Chapter 34, “Untitled,” is the shortest in the novel: “Bark gave me directions to their trailer. He said it was the back part of a McDonald’s drive-thru. Then I called to check back in with Hodie and she said my dad had just died, so I decided to slow down” (208). The prose is simply movement, direction, and speed. The chapter’s two illustrations—a small rendering of Our Lady of Guadalupe and a withering sunflower—convey her emotional vulnerability. Her father’s death evokes her Latin roots, particularly death and rebirth. As the petals of the sunflower peel away, the seeds dominate the bud. Her prose reflects only velocity; the illustrations, however, attempt something outside the material constraints of the road novel.

Tomato views her trip as a failure. Specifically, her femininity does not match the nurturing qualities she expects to embody: “the trip was over and here I was, hardly any different. Instead of sitting on the laundromat bench emanating love and strength, I felt like the kind of cranky old man the neighborhood kids tell monster stories about” (241). This seems in part because Tomato does not know what her radical transformation should look like. In spite of her aggressive style, she expects to feel more trusting and sensitive (172). The road trip ought to be “freeing” and “romantic,” but instead proves to be stressful and demanding (100). By the time she reaches San Francisco, Tomato wonders whether she has changed at all: “This was it. / I’d made it. / Did I feel like a different woman now?” (238). Simply put, she answers, “No.” (238). Here, I think Tomato underestimates how significant her narrative works as a counter-weight to the larger body of white, middle class, heterosexual road narratives. She recognizes the many personae she accesses throughout the trip but does not feel she possesses any fully: “I wasn’t a good blue-collar heterosexual in a trailer home, I wasn’t a Puerto Rican in the Bronx, I wasn’t a good one-night-stand lesbian, I wasn’t a good alcoholic artist, and I wasn’t a real biker chick” (241). But change, or rather recognizing herself as nonnormative, implies struggle; she feels the anxiety and physical redress of the road does not render any obvious change, yet she recognizes that identity is not singular, is not transcendent. Ultimately, she realizes “this whole individuality thing is a crock,” favoring collectivity instead: many identities in others (253). Simply this realization separates her from Sal in *On The Road*, who is left forever thinking of Dean Moriarty (Kerouac, 307). While Tomato may not realize as much, she has come to terms with what Sal cannot: that fixed identity, the secure individualism promised by midcentury oil security, is not only unachievable, it is sterile. Like Least Heat-Moon and Harris before her, she ends her journey with different expectations and observations than when she began. All three writers

exhibit adaptability that is part of the interpersonal, non-exploitative contact threaded throughout mid-century road novels. Lopez no longer views San Francisco as some shining, distant utopia. Rather, this is just where New York's "more fragile freaks have moved," the famous Haight Street "garishly heterosexual" and underwhelming (239). In essence, Tomato upends the destination as a beacon of future contentment. As further proof of this, her bike breaks down outside the laundromat, urging her to the bus. In the midst of identity crisis, at the very moment she reaches her destination to fulfill her "motorcycle-rider fantasy," the machine fails. Communal transportation is confining, scheduled, and smells "entirely of urine," but her ride exhibits a growing awareness of collectivity (245). The bus signifies her movement beyond individual identity, her movement towards collectivity rather than the estimated \$800 to repair her bike (a stiff reminder that capitalist enterprise keeps the bike moving) that might allow her to continue chasing a fixed identity that she has already upset. Here, Tomato is confronted by the corporate and material infrastructures that at once encourage measured patterns of self-exploration and account for and restrain non-normative individuality. By the time she reaches her stop, she smells like "the spaghetti-urine bus," and heads for Hodie's apartment (247). "Zen again," she says, sarcastically. The mechanical breakdown is her final test, the culmination of her misadventure. She leaves the bike behind because she refuses to be defined by it. She no longer needs it.

Observation in the Face of Environmental Decay

"I watched..." Least Heat-Moon writes early in *Blue Highways*. I feel this inclination defines the kind of contact Least Heat-Moon and Harris pursue—while delineating a place of departure for Lopez. In *Blue Highways*, the moment occurs when Least Heat-Moon speeds down

his first highway: Interstate 70 east out of Columbia, formerly the Booneslick Trail, part of the Sante Fe and Oregon trails (5).¹¹² It is the fastest way out of Missouri, but it means having to face both the future he abhors (the loud, crowded, exhaust-laden freeway) and an ancestral history he is continuously working to arbitrate: centuries of violence, suppression, and colonial formation over layers of Native history. It is an ominous beginning for the text, but it sets a precedent for the journey. This moment is when Least Heat-Moon cedes shaping anthropological and ecological contact and allows himself to observe the world around him for what it is. He makes a list of observations—"a green and grainy and corrupted ice over ponds," "blackbirds... moving as if invisibly tethered to one another," barn roofs, fencerows, and boys flying a kite—approaching his surroundings as objectively as possible. A similar movement takes place in *South of Haunted Dreams*, wherein communal affect with Southerners replaces his initial antagonism. Harris so often pursues a particular narrative of the South, interviewing strangers with leading questions that can only confirm his preconceptions of the South. It is not until he starts to listen to other stories and explore other histories that he can build a more nuanced understanding of the South, southerners, and the racial history of the region. His investigation into great-great-great grandfather Joseph begins as the pursuit of a specific racial narrative but ends as an exercise in discovery and recovery. Whereas once Harris hoped Joseph might reveal answers about Harris himself, unearthing Joseph's story gives new life to a narrative outside of

¹¹² Highways and Interstates were often constructed over old roads that settlers used while traveling west—later in the text, for instance, Least Heat-Moon notes that the Oregon Trail is "buried" beneath I-80N (239). On the Booneslick (Boones Lick) Trail, white colonists moving into the West battled the Osage Nation, pushing plains tribes into Oklahoma and Nebraska before settling the Missouri Territory through the forced labors of black slaves. This is Moon's "homeland," but it is a place of pain. Moon's father, Heat-Moon, notes that bloodlines and ancestry throughout the region all come from "red blood and a red heart," but the ghost dances Moon references imply a desperation in the face of violent displacement. Moon explains he and his Cherokee wife had argued up and down Missouri, adding his personal pain to his ancestors' throughout the region. In spite of this pain, Moon hopes, in his travel, to reveal new knowledge about his home.

the individual, a narrative that helps Harris approach racial injustice through alternative means. As I explored in chapter one, Sal and Dean's contact in *On The Road* is exploitive: they view the road for transformative experience beyond the boundaries of postwar American suburbia. However, the material limitations of the road make that transformation impossible, a twist that Sal and Dean fail to understand. They do not observe their surroundings; rather, they attempt to reshape places and experiences to fit their own story. While Least Heat-Moon and Harris both participate within the similar boundaries of oil capitalism, the Native and African American histories that inform their "alternative subjectivities," that manifest in *Ghost Dancing* and a BMW motorcycle, exhibits awareness of those boundaries and identifies spaces and forms of contact that are, in essence, far more subversive than Beat counterculture on the road. Most importantly, each text conveys a growing anxiety of environmental decay accelerated by the very petro-infrastructures that facilitate the journey; though neither *Blue Highways* nor *South of Haunted Dreams* offers feasible material alternatives to oil-petrochemical-capitalism, they acknowledge the *need* for an alternative. Both texts struggle with the futility of acting against structures of power from within the structure itself, a struggle for all 1980s and 1990s-era alternative drivers, but their towards collective anthropological and environmental contact implies a movement beyond the individual narrative that, to this point, utterly defines American petrocultures.

Flaming Iguanas best conveys the conflicted duality the "alternative driver" emblemizes. Different from earlier Beat and Hippie iterations of counterculture, Lopez's text is not simply the desire to act out social disobedience for the sake of disobedience. Tomato is far more aware of her position ecologically than Sal, Dean, or Kesey, than 1970s truck drivers and film makers struggling to come to terms with the shift from oil exuberance to oil scarcity. What's

more, she understands how her own body is affected by the trajectory of the petroleum infrastructure: the movement towards disposability, increasing pollution, threats of global climate change, and peak oil all have biological, physiological consequences. One of her short chapters, titled “Come On, You Never Want to Talk About How You’re Going to Die,” expresses anxieties about health and personal relationships due to environmental pollution, ignoring the details of travel momentarily:

I plan on getting cancer now so I won’t be surprised when I get it later. With all the crap in our food, water, and air. I think it’s the new way of dying naturally. Thoughts of getting hit by trucks and cancer inspire me to have a good time now. I’m not gonna go through the chemotherapy microwave because it’ll just come back later and I’ll have to go through the whole thing again of telling everyone how sick I am and saying goodbye to them. (76)

Her anxieties come out of rhetorics of pollution and environmental health that begin long before her road trip: from Leopold, Rachel Carson, and regulatory acts in the 1970s that aimed to protect personal health. These worries gain traction during the 1990s, particularly debates surrounding global warming, peak oil, and personal sustainability. Tomato lives in a “poisoned world,” where consumption has tangible consequences.¹¹³ Further, she recognizes this as a global threat: the crap in “our food, water, and air” implicates global systems in pollution, because pollutants in American air don’t just come from America, and pollutants Americans produce have effects far beyond American borders. Writing on environmental apocalypticism, Buell explains that one of the most “remarkable features” of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* is its “assertions that ‘the fate of all living things’ hinges on a minor cultural transaction taking place

¹¹³ Akin to Lawrence Buell’s “toxic discourse” in *Writing for an Endangered World*

in a remote cultural niche” (286). At no point does Tomato exhibit the kind of environmental awareness present in *Ceremony*, but she clearly recognizes herself as part of a larger, endangered ecology, even if her own outsider status renders her part of a “remote cultural niche.” She acknowledges the impact of pollutants on environmental and human health, but Tomato views these as inevitable byproducts of modern life. The chapter’s two illustrations—one of a seashell, the other of a cheerleader—seem a sarcastic response to the nihilism of ecotastrophe: one memorializes what unrestrained consumption destroys while the other laughs at the individual position in and among these global systems. What can she do but witness the destruction of her world? These same material anxieties (petro-affect) are what shape and reshape human interiority. In a surprising “Fuck You,” Tomato confronts her ecological and biological realities not through crushing self-doubt, but through a series of destructive actions reminiscent of George Hayduke and monkeywrenching in the late 1970s. Tomato chooses to consume *more*, to consume with reckless abandon. If she is aware of ecological fragility, why does she choose to throw caution to the wind? Tomato symbolizes a generation unable to withdraw from harmful patterns of consumption, even as ecological toxicity and global environmental catastrophe become their reality and future.

Other 90s road texts reflect a similar anxiety concerning humanity’s effect upon the environment—so much so, in fact, these texts make way for the ecoapocalyptic fictions I discuss in Chapter Four. Two films in particular—David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* (1990) and Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991)—recognize that the failures of American individualism are not simply concurrent with a growing fear of environmental collapse: the two problems are and always have been synergistic. In *Wild at Heart*, two definitively modern subjects—Sailor Ripley

(Nick Cage) and Lula Fortune (Laura Dern)—take to the road to escape Lula’s murderous mother. Lula is cautious about any hope for sublimity through technology:

“Uncle Pooch died in a car crash three years later while he was holidayin’ in Myrtle Beach. They still got way too much traffic there for my taste.... And another thing, baby.... That government of ours should be keepin’ us separated from outer space.... Sailor, that ozone layer is disappearin’. Seems to me the government could do somethin’ about it. One of these mornings the sun’ll come up and burn a hole clean through the planet like an X-Ray.”

Car crashes, traffic, or CFCs are merely bricks in a much larger wall of impending doom that looms out on the horizon. Sailor’s response, “That ain’t never will happen, honey. Least not in our lifetime,” shows the continuing individual struggle to recognize complex patterns of harm throughout the world. In trying to comfort her, he confirms her worst fears: that humanity is on an inevitable course of destruction.

In *Thelma and Louise*, the road again appears to offer an escape—from the realities of domestic violence and rape, from heteronormative sexual restrictions, and from lifestyles of caution or self-restraint—but it is finite. As a fugitive, Louise drives her 1966 Ford Thunderbird deep in the desert, at once the most dangerous and endangered ecosystem in the nation. Viewers make the subconscious connection between the fragile landscape Thelma and Louise traverse and the feelings of liberation they experience. They escape from police officers by driving through oil fields, smoke plumes billowing into the desert air, yet Louise warns Thelma not to litter. Smaller acts indicate a level of control, but the world of oil literally fills and poisons the air around them; they cannot stop the machinations of the petroleum infrastructure anymore than they can end the cycle of patriarchal violence that has relegated them to such a terminable flight.

Akin to Edna Pontellier, Thelma's awakening is powerful, but delicate: "Something's crossed over in me and I can't go back.... I'm wide awake. I don't remember ever feeling this awake. You know what I mean? Everything looks different. Do you feel like that too? Like you have something to look forward to?" Both Thelma and Louise understand there is no escape, but there is also no going back. In their last desperate moments, they leave the road and drive through the desert, chased and then surrounded by armed FBI agents and police officers. Rather than submit to another form of patriarchal force, Thelma and Louise, like Tomato, opt for the "Fuck You." Louise guns the engine and grasps Thelma's hand as the Thunderbird launches off a desert canyon cliff.

The path Sailor, Lula, Thelma, and Louise all choose is to exploit the systems of oil capitalism in their most absurd manifestations. In a world so clearly weighted against them, Sailor and Lula feel their only future is one of excess and pleasure. Taking to the road in Sailor's convertible, they dance, drink, and make love knowing there are dangers chasing them—hitmen—and apocalyptic threats ahead. In *Thelma and Louise*, the lone trucker (hauling an oil tanker) stands out as a symbol for oil-driven, highway machismo. The truck seems to follow them throughout the film. Each time they see the driver, he makes lewd gestures or yells unsolicited sexual advances over the roar of the truck's engine. Thelma and Louise confront (t)his grotesque bravado: they fire on the tanker and marvel as it explodes brilliantly. Oil cannot offer them safety or equality; however, exploding those systems of containment delivers an instance of true resistance. In the film's climax, they confront their unsustainable trajectory. Careening off the desert cliff acknowledges the limitations of oil culture and the lengths to which one must go in order to disrupt those limitations. Neither Thelma nor Louise can be contained, but they also run out of road. Oil's material limitations once bound the subject, leaving both

Thelma and Louise with two possible futures: “things like incarceration, cavity search, life imprisonment, death by electrocution, that sort of thing” or sacrifice. When the material world fails to bring them deliverance, they decide to leave the material world entirely.

Tomato Rodriguez’s consumption follows a similar line of dissident agitation, set to consume at will and in excess. And while one might initially view her actions as simply wasteful or lacking environmental awareness, the political climate of hyperexuberance and personal sustainability approaching the millennium makes her consumption—particularly of oil—defiant. Fredrick Buell points to the “culture of hyperexuberance” that emerged in the 1980s, when “radical nature and social disequilibrium turned into opportunities, not closures; they became the energizing motor of human innovation and evolution, not the meltdown of the earth” (214). Hyperexuberance “appeared across a wide swath of American popular culture, marked corporate styles, and left its imprint on popular social analysis and theory,” claiming “that people were already beyond their limits, out of balance and in disequilibrium with nature”; thus the need to create new technologies marked by abundance in a post-scarcity society (215). Similarly, the overwhelming shift from environmental activism to personal sustainability during the Clinton administration transformed projects of cultural change into shallow statements of political ideology.¹¹⁴ Rather than large-scale social revolution, personal sustainability meant minor changes to daily habitus with little to no effect upon larger patterns of consumption—fuel efficiency, for instance, does not reduce one’s commute as suburban sprawl only increases over time.

Tomato opts for hyperexuberance, but not in pursuit of environmental utopia: she pursues unbridled, destructive patterns, a result of the individual’s insignificance on a global scale and

¹¹⁴ Here, I am thinking of the Green movement, the explosion of electric cars and energy-saving home materials.

the reality of environmental toxicity. She both embodies and challenges the late-twentieth century neoliberal consumer, one who remains tied to oil but is also aware of the consequences of her consumption. Tomato has contempt for self-control, for the impulse to limit and bound oneself. She makes clear that she is set to use whatever she can, to approach life like hotel living where “there were no consequences” (133). She views oil as an instigator, but the material driver of systemic power that should be interrupted: “We’ll be riding the cheapest motorcycles we can find / stopping every forty-five minutes or so for gas. Truck stop waitresses will wink and jam dollar bills in our happy little beautifully tanned fists, but we’ll whisper ‘no thanks,’ because we don’t need it / we’ll live off the fumes of our estrogen” (2). In her attempt to symbolize gasoline, Tomato twists the importance of oil as material. The fuel’s material function is what allows the bike movement, what imbues the bike with explosive cultural resonance. The machine and the driver are already at once commodified. And while many other things become products—the body, sex, individualism—the bike and oil are, again, symbolic for her pursuits. Tomato attempts to exert power over the world around her through material control. If oil capitalism determines personal identity and her identity is defined by rebellion, the only truly meaningful resistance is to try and deplete the resource so thoroughly as to collapse it.

Least Heat-Moon, Harris, and Lopez assume different methods for addressing the petrocultures they confront as their road experiences deepen. Least Heat-Moon and Harris matriculate to places of personal comfort that are problematized by modernity: nature, family, and storytelling. They experience geographical discomfort, but routinely reach for solid ground. Even in those moments of comfort, however, we recognize “solid” ground is always immaterial. Placed on a spectrum, it is Tomato’s recklessness in *Flaming Iguanas* that seems the most radical. Rather than reaching for something to stabilize her identity, Tomato opts to destabilize

everything—including herself. At times, the depiction of speed and pleasure in *Flaming Iguanas* reflects the sensibility of earlier road novels, yet the combination of knowledge and action sets Tomato apart from mid-century consumers and late-century contemporaries. In spite of a dark, polluted future, she chooses her path because she has already faced what those before her will come to realize. Her consumption—a reckless abandon that reflects her place within the world she inhabits—makes way for narratives of ecotastrophe.

CHAPTER IV.

ECO-APOCALYPTICISM AND THE END OF PETRO-CAPITALISM: NAVIGATING PETROCULTURE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

*"It's said war - war never changes.
Men do, through the roads they walk.
And this road - has reached its end"
--Fallout*

The Sublime Fire

In the last week of November 2016, a small fire ignited in Great Smoky Mountains National Park at Chimney Tops, two columnar peaks near Route-441—the same state highway that the man and the boy travel through the mountains in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (Morgan). When the National Park Service (NPS) Fire Management Officer/Incident Commander (FMO/IC) initially spotted smoke columns rising near Chimney Tops, suppression efforts were minimal. On November 24, the fire covered roughly two acres. The FMO and several NPS wildland firefighters attempted to contain the fire, but the steep terrain rendered lines ineffective. The Chimney Tops trails were closed as the FMO considered other suppression techniques (United States, 3). Wildland fire management has varied greatly over the twentieth century.¹¹⁵ Over the last roughly thirty years, FMOs have been trained to assess risk, considering

¹¹⁵ Wildland fire management varies by agency. Until the mid-1970s, the NPS trended towards complete suppression under the auspices of preservation. Policies changes in 1974, 1976, and 1978 worked towards a more ecological fire management plan (Sellars, 253-258). The National Forest Service thinned forests by managing timber, managing loggers and access.

fuels, terrain, season, drought conditions, weather, and proximity to populated areas or historical structures.

Collected data contributes to FMO assessments; however, risk factors can greatly alter fire management plans in the moment. The FMO depends upon observation and regional fire patterns to craft a management plan. Given historical data, the likelihood of a major wildland fire in the higher elevations of southern Appalachia late in November is extremely unlikely. As the fire spread, covering nearly 400 acres, the FMO and senior park leaders implemented a “box suppression strategy” (United States, 3). Using pre-existing features as natural boundaries, firefighters would dig a fire-line to contain the blaze to a designated area. The strategy failed. The Chimney Tops 2 Fire surprised FMOs, quickly spreading throughout the region. By November 28, “high winds and dry fuels” merged the Chimney Tops 2 Fire with several other monitored burns outside park boundaries, referenced as the “Sevier County Fires.”¹¹⁶

The Sevier County Fires grew into a complex network of wildland fire that burned through the region, damaging nearby towns such as Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. The fires killed fourteen people and destroyed 2,545 structures, amounting to one of the worst regional natural disasters in history. Early in *The Road*, the man and the boy pass through the “ruins of a resort town,” presumably either Gatlinburg or Pigeon Forge. They gaze over “burnt forests for miles” and “fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes” (McCarthy, 29-30). Scenes of torched landscapes layered in gray ash are emblematic of *The Road*’s unpredictable, devastated, postapocalyptic environment. Yet unpredictable wildfires in 2016 indicate a similar ecological instability in our own time. The imagery of the Sevier County Fires bears an uncanny resemblance to the burnt towns and forests in *The Road*. Though published a decade before the Sevier County tragedy, *The Road* anticipates volatile global environmental conditions that make wildfires such as Chimney Tops 2 possible.

¹¹⁶ The connection between McCarthy and Sevier County has a long history, dating back to his earliest novels, including *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child of God*.

Timing and abnormal fire behavior made the Chimney Tops 2 Fire the focus of the biannual meeting of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) in Washington DC in December 2016. Heads from all federal agencies dealing in wildland fire discussed the unique seasonal/weather circumstances, the various suppression methods employed, and the consequences of what was framed as a freak occurrence. Just prior to the WFLC meeting, Associate Director of the National Park Service Rick Obernesser and Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Harry Humbert went to the Smoky Mountain region to observe the effects of the fire. When WFLC asked to describe the scene of the fire, Obernesser said, “Uncanny fire behavior, having fought fire there myself in the late 1980s” (Obernesser). A typical wildland fire in the Smoky Mountain region would focus in the vegetative valleys, where rivers and rocky outcrops act as natural firebreaks. Obernesser and Humbert observed “a lot of fire evidence along the ridges and peaks with a lot of fuel left unburned in the valleys.” Historically, fires in Appalachia smolder in the valley duff and burn *up* mountainsides (increasing in elevation) where eventually fuel becomes more sparse. During the Chimney Tops 2 Fire, extremely high winds blew the fire from ridge to ridge, where the flames burned *down* mountainsides (decreasing in elevation). Regional wind events called “mountain waves” (uniquely unpredictable wind patterns) rendered standard management and suppression techniques ineffective (*Chimney Tops 2 Fire Review: Individual Fire Review Report*, 44). Once the fires burned into the valleys, record drought conditions left the “duff” extremely vulnerable:

The impact of the drought was substantial. The drought resulted in lower moisture contents of not only dead fuels such as leaves, sticks, logs, and duff, but live vegetation as well. In drought-free years, duff, large logs, and live vegetation such as understory

shrubs are much less flammable. The addition of these fuels to a wildland fire increases its intensity and makes it more difficult to control. (44)

Even in the midst of eco-apocalypse, the man and the boy of *The Road* see this pattern. At night, they can see the “deep orange” glow of fires “still burning high in the mountains” (McCarthy, 30). They leave their fires burning each morning because there is no fear of lighting vegetation along the road: dead, dried timber high on the mountain ridges is the only fuel left to burn. The Chimney Tops 2 Fire was, if nothing else, confusing. Left with the consequences of the burn, WFLC debated how this fire might influence future wildland fire management. In response, agency director Tom Tidwell (former Chief of the Forest Service with over forty years of forest and wildland fire management experience) said: “All those things you’ve learned for so many years, you need to throw them all away because they don’t matter anymore. Firefighting is changing so fast due to fuels and weather that it almost doesn’t matter what it is you think you know, it’ll be something you’ve never seen before” (Obernesser).

Tidwell’s response to the Chimney Top 2 Fire suggests two vital ramifications. First, the effects of global climate change, whether accepted by current administrations or not, is (and has been for many years) impacting global ecologies. The August 2018 edition of *Harper’s* attempts to tackle the increasingly worrisome (and costly) trend of “mega-fires,” “blazes that burn more than 100,000 acres” (“As The World Burns” 23). *Harper’s* opening report, “As The World Burns,” notes that “in the past three decades, the number of mega-fires has been increasing exponentially: before 1995 there was an average of one per year; in the past decade the average has increased to ten each year” (23). These fires occur all over the globe, in California, Portugal, eastern China, and throughout central Africa and show no indication of lessening in the years to come. The slow violence of climate change literally fuels the fast violence of wildfires.

Second, Tidwell's response suggests the policies and methodological adjustments set forth by the WFLC are merely band-aids. *Harper's* argues that "until Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world come up with more effective strategies for managing a fire-prone landscape," the number of mega-fires will only increase over time. Adapting can only go so far if we are unable to address the fundamental cause of unpredictable ecologies: global climate change. To *Harper's* credit, they acknowledge climate change as a primary instigator of fire-prone global environmental conditions; however, the NPS Individual Fire Review Report on the Chimney Tops 2 fire does not: the report concludes, "it seems that we are entering an era where the 'unprecedented' is happening with increasing frequency" (United States, 106). Strategic alterations frame disasters like Chimney Tops 2 as a product to unique environmental circumstances, rather than as the inevitable outcome of chemical and atmospheric imbalances that fundamentally alter the biosphere. *Harper's* may be right—there must be better management solutions—but until the agencies charged with managing and fighting wildfires can fully acknowledge climate change as the root cause of fire-prone landscape conditions worldwide, management can only go so far. In "Combustion Engines," Richard Manning notes that Congress already "appropriates nearly \$4 billion annually for fighting wildfires," yet when fires converge into mega-fires the likelihood of containing nature reduces drastically (25). In other words, Tidwell's response suggests that in spite of evolving fire management techniques, increasingly unpredictable wildland fire patterns are the result of something much larger than one incident's unique circumstances and thus require action much larger than agency-level management plans.

I am not claiming McCarthy presciently predicted the events of the Chimney Tops 2 Fire or the Sevier County Fires. However, *The Road* depicts an alternative world wherein the environment, the sensorium, and human interiority are radically altered by climate change. As

Alexa Weik von Mossner notes in *Affective Ecologies*, the novel's visual imagery "signals abandonment, death, and decay" (1). Likewise, other senses, "the feel of air," "the stink of their dirty clothes," and the "utter lack of natural sounds," each contribute to the "reader's understanding that this environment is dead" (2). These resonant moments, wherein the "visceral forces beneath, alongside, and generally *other than* conscious knowing vital forces insisting beyond emotion," generate motion and emotion that has affectual impact on both the characters within the novel and readers (Gregg, 1.). Affect is one method McCarthy employs to reorient the reader's perception of environment, that "emotively and materially relocates the human self as ecological niche" (Rozelle, 1). In *The Road*, fire produces one of the novel's first sublime moments:

He woke toward the morning with the fire down to coals and walked out to the road. Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. The snow orange and quivering. A forest fire was making its way along the tinder-box ridges above them, flaring and simmering against the overcast like the northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember. (McCarthy, 31)

Though von Mossner notes all the ways in which sensory perception indicates absence in *The Road*, here the presence and force of fire has affectual resonance. The man is so entranced, he ignores the otherwise inescapable cold. The bright colors are so different from the gray color-scape that permeates the text, they become mesmerizing. The visual stimulation rouses levels of sensory perception that have lain dormant, sacrificed to exigencies of survival on the road. But the fire does *more* than simply evoke sensory perceptions: it stimulates motion within the man's subconscious and conscious minds. It stirs "something in him long forgotten," an accretive

emotion that marks his body's "*belonging* to a world" and the "world's belonging" to bodies (Gregg, 2). In *Ecosublime*, Lee Rozelle explains literary moments of "awe and terror" in the face of "infinite complexity and contingency of place" prompt "responsible engagements with natural spaces, and it recalls crucial links between human subject and non-human world" (1.) Within the context of this passage, responsible ecological engagement looks quite different from what we might imagine from our contemporary vantage; in fact, I argue *The Road* even calls into question what we might imagine as "crucial links between human subject and non-human world." The man's memory, his stimulation to action through litany, is emblematic of his petromelancholia, grief and longing for the world of "easy oil" that Stephanie LeMenager explains shapes the human's understanding of and relationship to the world he or she inhabits (104). As the novel is wont to do, the text concurrently reminds us that this is no longer a world for humans or organic life of any kind. The light of the fire shimmers "against the overcast," air so thick with ash it blocks out the sun. For a moment he might convince himself the colors are like the "lost sun returning at last," but deep down he knows that light is gone. He longs for the comfort, ease, and security of his prelapsarian world. Yet each fire is simply one step closer to a global conclusion.

The Road resonates with ecocritics for many reasons. Gabriella Blasi claims *The Road's* "narrator utilizes the apocalyptic mode as an allegory of epochal change" (92). Derek Thiess also states that "scientific explanations" for the environmental devastation "are not the focus of the novel," rather that the "emphasis on relationships... is also a sign of a certain relativism" (533). Both articles focus less on material transition than on symbolic meaning. A third approach by Hannah Stark asks readers to consider vision as a function of both material futurity and present "climate change skepticism" (72). This chapter diverges from threads of symbolic scholarship in favor of reading the material role of oil that facilitates, (re)shapes, and delineates the human

body and mind within the novel. Oil, as both provider of modern convenience and instigator of environmental conflict implicates consumers within a web of ecological toxicity that is utterly devastating. Further, the shocking, often overwhelming depiction of environmental futurity amidst uncontrollable, irreversible ecological decay is one of tangible material consequence and moral/ethical reorientation. This is to say that petroaffect, even after the collapse of petro-modernity, continues to incite change within human interiority. While the majority of scholarship on *The Road* points to interplay between sociopolitical commentary and allegorical opportunity, oil as material with agency and tenacity has not been a focus of critical attention. Examining the influence of petroculture throughout *The Road* allows for an alternative reading that critiques oil's enduring affectual magnitudes. Beginning with the road itself, I examine how the material surface structures both routine and environmental interiority. Using the road as a framework to view the man and the boy's environmental contact and ethical progression, I then compare cannibalism and climate destabilization, the novel's two primary environmental/ethical conflicts. Cannibalism as consumption-out-of-control serves as spectacle to evoke an emotional reaction from the reader and to call into question consumptive patterns. Climate destabilization works more subtly upon the reader, in the "*in-between-ness*" that indicates a more "sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage... of forces and intensities," but arguably forecasts more devastating consequences (Gregg, 1). Together, cannibalism's abject horror and climate destabilization's affective manipulation implicate oil as the root material source of contemporary environmental issues.¹¹⁷

This chapter continues a reading of twentieth-century petrocultures centered around the road as a trajectory from exuberance to collapse. *The Road* exhibits a sharp departure from

¹¹⁷ Here, I extend Frederick Buell's call to examine "oil's relationships to culture, *both* in the past and present" into the future or parallel presents (70).

material exhilaration during the mid-century, when individualism and sensory pleasures imagined through oil and the growing petroleum infrastructure were integrally intertwined into American narratives of freedom and self-reliance (Buell, 81). In McCarthy's reimagining, the pursuit of transcendence and transformative experience on the road is superseded by the ambulate quest for species survival. The novel conceptually problematizes survival within the complexities of biological instinct, material accumulation, cultural memory, and ethical debate. Carl Miller claims the man and the boy are not focused on "material accumulation," but are motivated instead by "survival" (Miller, 54). Is survival, then, simply to remain alive? For the heart to continue beating, the lungs to continue breathing? To consider material accumulation and survival as binaries oversimplifies the resiliency of petroculture in shaping humanity's relationship to (or claim over) material resources. Or is survival as Casey Jergenson suggests the construction of a "didactic metaphysic" used to reconstruct "the communities that the apocalypse has erased?"—to somehow regain that which was lost (Jergenson, 128)? The man yearns for prelapsarian stability, for the safeties and securities that were made possible by "easy oil." However, the boy, whose only connection to the prelapsarian world is the man, embodies a unique post-oil strangeness. I argue *The Road* calls for a radical reorientation of ethical consumption, a burden placed upon the boy, who must ultimately decide between being on the road or veering off-road, a choice that has momentous implications going way beyond mere spatial considerations. Eco-apocalypse restructures hierarchies of power, value, and ethics. Within the text, petroculture's environmental, social, and cultural consequences reform environmental contact and notions of the human. This is a novel about contrasting worlds, but the most acute contrast is rooted in the memory of an oil world and a drastically altered post-oil world.

Rather than cosmic accident, I examine eco-apocalypse in *The Road* as the culmination of slow violence, what Rob Nixon explains as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).¹¹⁸ Ultimately, I propose *The Road* identifies petro-modernity as the root cause of the narrative’s ecological violence, violence that encompasses the fossil-fuel era and peaks with oil. Oil collapse signals human failure to shift perception of and contact with material resources; it is the apex of scarcity seen throughout the 1970s and, thus, a failure to renegotiate exploitative patterns of consumption. The road itself, the text’s central setting and narratological boundary, depicts the consequences of centuries of unbridled consumption. Framing the chapter through the lens of slow violence acknowledges petrocultures that historically instigate global environmental anxiety and *continue* to shape characters’ interactions with environment. McCarthy proposes humanity find alternatives to the road that steer away from petro-modernity—that we, in fact, go off-road.¹¹⁹ Moreover, slow violence allows contemporary readers an opportunity to reevaluate the ubiquities of modern life constructed by oil (Szeman, 816). The novel ends purposefully with beauty and life captured in

¹¹⁸ Thiess notes a “rare interview with McCarthy” reveals the cause of eco-apocalypse to be a meteor strike (533). Further, Thiess claims the ambiguity of the disaster is unimportant, as the focus of the novel is “the relationship of the father and son,” which in turns resists “normative, deterministic science as cause and effect” (533). For the purposes of this study, I claim the science of eco-apocalypse is central to *The Road*, specifically because the relationships within the novel are determined by the physical environment the characters inhabit.

¹¹⁹ *The Road* fits within frameworks of eco-apocalypse set forth by both Lawrence Buell and Imre Szeman. Buell’s challenge to science fiction, “of imagining the remote consequences of the transformation of environment that seem to follow from the unprecedented instability widely perceived to mark both the actual state of physical nature, as human power over it increases, and the understanding of what natural order (if any) inherently is and what the human relation to it should be” perfectly describes *The Road*’s accelerated vision of slow violence as a result of petro-modernity (Buell, 284). Szeman’s framework for “apocalyptic environmentalism,” one of three distinct discourses with which culture imagines oil futures, “understands itself as a *pedagogic* one, a genre of disaster designed to modify behavior and transform the social” (Szeman, 816). What is most important here is McCarthy focuses primarily on *ethical* transformations; economic and technological alterations help construct the text’s alternative world, but function mostly in the background. In other words, we must first reorient the human’s position within and in relation to environment before we can, as Daniel Worden argues, “glimpse the possible imagining of a future without fossil fuels” (Worden, 125).

memory. This stark contrast to the bleak ruin that pervades the preceding text invokes one of two responses: if we are doomed, to appreciate beauty when we encounter it and live an ethical life; or, if it's not too late, to institute radical changes to prevent *The Road's* future.

Though the road as material surface may remain, the rupture from pursuit of individual freedom to species survival signals the conceptual end of the "road trip." As it turns out, the American legacy of transformative individualism in *On The Road* is the ecological, humanitarian desolation of *The Road*.

The Road: Material Shape(r) of Interiority

Awoken by "the first gray light" of the day, the man's first conscious thoughts in *The Road* are of the boy and the road itself (4).¹²⁰ The boy is the man's reason to live, "his warrant," but the road is where he lives. The "blacktop" asphalt stands out against the homogenous gray world—not Sal's "one long red line" in *On The Road*, but a segmented black marker snaking through the ashen valley below. After scanning the valley and watching what is left of the sunrise, the man walks back to their small camp and removes "some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup" out of a grocery cart, placing the food on a "blue plastic tarp," the scavenged remnants of oil-petrochemical-capitalism (5). He watches the boy sleep for a moment, but finds his attention drawn back to the road. "This was not a safe place," he thinks, "They could be seen from the road now it was day" (5). The road occupies his mind. It has geographic and material resonance essential to their survival, yet it is dangerous as well. After eating, "an hour later they were on the road," an allusion to Kerouac's novel that conceptually

¹²⁰ I am referring to the "man" and the "boy" because this how they are conveyed by McCarthy and originally perceived the reader. Capitalizing as the "Man" and the "Boy" invites an allegorical reading that goes against my materialist reading.

acknowledges where the road trip begins so that we might understand: *The Road* is where the road trip ends.

The road itself stands out as the central site and image of ecological and ethical/humanitarian conflict. The road frames and bounds the text, allowing little to no physical movement or imaginative possibility beyond its surface. Consequently, limitations to setting and narrative reflect humanity's inability to think beyond the trajectory of petromodernity and thus implicate the latter within the novel's accelerated ecological slow violence. Buell explains that postwar petrochemicals applied oil to the body, to the body's interior, and to the mind (81). Likewise, LeMenager petroleum aesthetics argues that loving oil has become an essential part of modern life: being on the road feels like being alive (80). "After oil," many of the road's basic functions remain unchanged (it provides mobility, direction, and a sense of geography) but the vivacity contemporary petroconsumers associate with driving, fertilizers, plastics, food, medicine, or makeup has greatly diminished.¹²¹ Here, being on the road feels like surviving, in the strictest sense. The remnants of commerce and traffic that litter the highway are reminders that roads stimulated modern economies through excessive consumption of fossil fuels. The trash that pollutes the road also sustains those who travel on it. The man and the boy collect plastic containers because they provide a means to safely store food and water, but also because modern plastics were a central component of oil-petrochemical-capitalism, ubiquitous and resistant to decomposition. Abandoned cars, trucks, and trains occasionally obstruct the highway. Once central components of petro-modernity, they are now inactive and inert. The rusting metal

¹²¹ Here, I reference "after oil" to allude to "After Oil: Explorations and Experiments in the Future of Energy, Culture and Society," a collaborative, interdisciplinary research partnership based at the University of Alberta. The partnership is "designed to explore, critically and creatively, the social, cultural and political changes necessary to facilitate a full-scale transition from fossil fuels to new forms of energy" (<http://afteroil.ca/about/>). For the purposes of this chapter, I claim that oil resonates long after its collapse or replacement, though I find the "After Oil" project to be highly useful in imagining an alternative to oil with current technologies.

frames now serve alternative purposes: as shelter, sites for scavenging, or as reminders of petro-modernity's vast tentacular network. Early in the novel, a semi-truck jackknifed across a bridge blocks the highway. The pair must unload the cart and move underneath the trailer, literally shifting the body to accommodate the obstacle: "he pushed the cart up under the trailer but the handle wouldn't clear. They'd have to slide it under sideways" (45). The man searches the truck for any useable goods, then both sleep in the cab, using the truck as shelter from the storm. The next morning, the man decides to look into the trailer in the off chance they might scavenge something they need. Inside, he sees only dead bodies, "Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunk in their rotting clothes" (47). Like the man, others were drawn to the semi-truck as a symbol of prelapsarian commerce and stability. The rigs themselves, entombed within a pattern of cultural memory, are now only a space for decaying bodies, wasting away without fuel to sustain the machine. As the man and the boy move south, highway remnants are increasingly obstructions opposed to sites of opportunity.

The ubiquity of petro-infrastructure throughout *The Road* establishes historical links to a culture of overconsumption while simultaneously revealing the ways in which petroculture continues to act upon the mind. The road, for instance, stretches on throughout the valley and into the mountains as if it has no termination. Roadways seem unending, systems of limitless application that "suggest movement outward, in time" (LeMenager, 75). This movement occurs both within the mind and upon the landscape. Small textual markers begin to plot how petroculture leaks into even the most mundane modern behaviors. These moments gesture towards growth as the central ambition of petro-modernity: the need to expand, to increase, to spread. Growth influences the petro-consumers perception of material resources, marking the influence of petroculture on action and routine beyond simply actions of production and

consumption. “Petrotopia,” as LeMenager terms it, grows without “an ethical imperative that ascribes notions of consequence to time,” and thus “creates problems of scale that, in turn, invite[s] the return of repressed consequences, irreversible damage” (75). The man finds a Coca-Cola, a rare “treat” for boy, but one manufactured by one of the most recognizable global corporations of the twentieth century (23). The man gives the boy the coke because Coca-Cola is not unique to him: it is unique within their post-oil world, where corporations like Coca-Cola no longer exist. “It’s really good,” the boy says after a sip, but proceeds to hand the can back to the man, insisting he drink some as well. The boy mimicking the man’s generosity, but his action indicates that the coke is special to the man only, who associates the product with the age during which it was manufactured.

A second example: the boy’s few toys include a plastic yellow truck buried at the bottom of the cart (35). In their few spare moments, the boy will occasionally play with the toy, shaping “roads in the ash with a stick,” and slowly directing the truck along the streets making “truck noises” (60). Here we witness the ways in which petromodernity trains and shapes consumers from infancy: even children’s toys are oil machines. This is true in the literal sense, the toy is made from plastics, and in the imaginative sense: the truck is not a real truck but still trains children who play with it in the functions of a truck, in the rules of roadways, in roadbuilding and city planning. Interestingly, the boy knows that a drivable truck, a mobile machine opposed to the hundreds of immobile machines they pass in the text, makes “truck noises.” Whether he understands that the difference is combustible fuels is unclear, but he does intuit a difference between the machines on the highway and the machine he imagines in the toy. But, considering what the sound of a truck represents in their post-oil world (the first cannibals they encounter are anticipated by the sounds of a diesel engine), it is odd the boy finds pleasure in the toy. Is the

toy, then, simply a representation of the human's innate ties to the machine? Does the influence of oil run so deep that the boy, whose only experiences are post-oil experiences, instinctually knows how the toy works? Clearly not. Presumably, the man has taught him throughout his childhood what the toy means and how to use it. The toy is not simply a marker of petroculture's influence on the human through objects, but rather how petroculture is conveyed through generations.

Last, the man uses a "tattered oilcompany roadmap" to navigate through the mountains (42). As I note in the Introduction, oil companies produced roadmaps and travel guides throughout the twentieth century to stimulate domestic automobility and increase market shares within a given region. The man uses this map to teach the boy how to navigate: "We cross the bridge here," he tells the boy, "It looks to be about eight miles or so. This is the river. Going east. We follow the road here along the eastern slope of the mountains." Further, the map provides the pair with privilege, a claim over certain spaces. "These are our roads," the man says, "the black lines on the map. The state roads" (42). Interestingly, the twisted state-highway network is still colored black on their map; these are "blue highways" but pair's map predates the interstate road atlas that Least Heat-Moon uses to navigate. The state highways are *their* roads because interstate highways belong to the "bad guys." The back roads are less traveled and thus less dangerous. Though the man knows interstate highways expedite commerce transport, and consequently provide quicker movement, the state highways accomplish a similar goal without as much risk. Thus, the map also functions as an artifact of history: it illustrates how the road came into being and what has or has not changed in their alternative world. Likewise, it conveys petroculture's resiliency in shaping the human's relationship to their environment. "Why are they the state roads?" the boy asks:

Because they used to belong to the state. What used to be called the states.

But there's not anymore states?

No.

What happened to them?

I don't know exactly. That's a good question.

But the roads are still there.

Yes. For a while.

How long a while?

I don't know. Maybe quite a while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be ok for a while. (43)

The man does not know what happened to the states, to governments for that matter. But the highway exceeds nationalism, even as it retains its original infrastructural purpose/position.

What might uproot a highway? More roads? This has proven false, as the fusion of state and interstate highways have shown. Perhaps an "off-road" alternative? The man cannot imagine a force that might uproot petroculture because he is unable to think "off-road." The map conveys how the man's conception of mobility, even without an automobile, is still mired in his oil sensibilities.

Each example serves as a reminder of petroculture's pervasiveness in facilitating modern life during the twentieth century. Though micro-observations separately, the familiarity and fluency with which the man and boy interact with these objects indicate an ideological endurance that resists the ecological and cultural destabilization they inhabit. The collective remnants of petroculture construct a historical narrative of overconsumption that defines the trajectory of petromodernity and continues to define characters' actions in oil's absence.

While absence and loss define the novel's tone, the accumulation of petro-affect demonstrates what has remained: the material dependencies and ideologies of petromodernity. The man is inclined to give the boy the Coca-Cola because, for him, the soda evokes specific feelings: pleasure, security, and surplus. To further reinforce petroculture's resiliency, the spaces and objects the man and the boy inhabit and interact with are spaces and objects that contemporary readers are easily familiar with. The first structure they encounter in the novel is a gas station where the man and the boy scavenge for resources. Locating the text's first opportunity to scavenge at the gas station recognizes this space as a site of material excess, thus implicating varying levels of petro-infrastructure in slow violence. Gas stations are designed to maintain, grow, and perpetuate petroculture. They are tactically organized, predictable modules of commerce regularly constructed along roadways to sustain and expand automobility, to disburse resources and systematize consumption. As such, the gas station is one component of the petroleum infrastructure whose persistence and ubiquity continue to shape and reshape *The Road's* survivors. Unlike the communal spaces in *On The Road* or *Smokey and the Bandit*, where commercial need generates congregation, this gas station is abandoned, overgrown with weeds and covered in dust.¹²² It is an uncanny rendering for modern readers, who are likely to experience the gas station as a hub of activity and movement. The man investigates the building with the understanding that this node of oil capitalism echoes its commercial purpose within the petroleum infrastructure. He examines the grounds, "the pumps standing with their hoses oddly still in place. The windows intact" (6). There is only a "rumor" of gas still in the pumps (a "faint and stale" smell), a toolbox full of drive-sockets and tools, and "old automotive manuals" left

¹²² In *On The Road*, Sal hitches a ride at the gas station back to New York after being unable to find a ride on Route 6 (Kerouac, 11). In *Smokey and the Bandit*, the gas station is a space where the Bandit can prove his racial progressiveness against the racist sheriff by talking "jive" with a black attendant.

inert in the garage. The man searches through the building but finds “nothing there that he could use,” before finally remembering to drain all of the “quart plastic oilbottles” found in the trash (6). They scavenge a “half quart of motor oil... oil for their little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns,” (7). Once, the gas station would dispense gallons of gasoline. Now, it contains a mere half quart of less refined product, but product with incredible value. Oil lights the slutlamp, their only source of light outside of the filtered sunlight. The slutlamp extends waking hours and eases environmental anxiety from lack of sunlight, similar to kerosene lamps during the late 19th century.¹²³ The lamplight helps the boy sleep and allows the man to tell “old stories of courage and justice” (41). A seemingly insignificant amount of oil conveys and perpetuates the man’s oil world ethics. The humanities live on in *The Road* as explicit examples of petroculture, reliant on oil to exist. Later, they again stop at a garage and use the leftover tools to repair one of the cart’s broken wheels.

The enduring influence of petroculture within eco-apocalypse is only made possible by the vast material networks that once sustained petromodernity. Petroculture becomes emblematic of humanity’s most hubristic appetites. As we have seen throughout previous chapters, successive iterations of the American highway come to symbolize the growth of industrial modernity as oil capitalism evolves into the nation’s dominant energy economy. Each version of the highway—from local, to state, to interstate—redirects and systematizes mobility to encourage and accommodate commercial growth. One gas station, for instance, indicates the pair’s proximity to an abandoned American city: once a hub of rampant consumption, the city is now merely “blackened lightpoles,” abandoned road construction, and “billboards advertising

¹²³ The slutlamp is a crude but effective technology, essentially a shallow pan with a thin chimney to contain some type of wick (likely cloth rags). While not the most efficient lamp, it is easily constructed and functions with very few parts. It is very possible the man constructed this lamp himself.

motels” (8). As daylight fades, the city disappears, lost from vision. The little slutlamp, stuck “in the rocks on the side of the hill” is the only light (and thus, the only discernable technology) left in the darkness: “little more than a mote” (9). The unnamed city is a burnt shell, left dark and desolate without oil.¹²⁴ The absence of oil (thus absence of power) does not simply mean an absence of light: it means an absence of sociality, culture, and life. In other words, the absence of light is the absence of the human, what psychologically and intellectually sets the human apart from the merely existent. Ultimately, over-consumption leads to scarcity, absence, and loss: what constructs the “human” (oil energy) exists in only tiny, infinitely valuable amounts of material resources.

The lamplight is eerie yet comforting. When fossil fuels powered electrical grids, light was immediate, abundant. When compared to the setting’s perpetual half-light, the “cold glaucoma dimming away the world,” artificial lighting seems almost indescribable. It carries significance (3). The light sets the man and boy apart from the enveloping darkness in the city below. Likewise, the man’s stories establish a moral/ethical imperative that attempt to counter fractured humanitarianism in the absence of energy. The light provides some small semblance of linearity in and amongst the devastation of the slow violence—even as we recognize that the slutlamp is still only possible through the material remnants of petroculture that hold sway over body and mind. While the boy has no world to balance this distinction against, he instinctually asks the man to leave the lamp burning: “Can we leave the lamp on till I’m asleep?” (10).¹²⁵ The material and affectual significance of this moment has ranging implications. The lamp is simple and requires small amounts of oil—likewise, it emits an analogously small amount of light. Since

¹²⁴ The city is presumably Knoxville, if we trace their geography and consider the importance of Knoxville within McCarthy’s other works, particularly *Suttree* (Morgan).

¹²⁵ Unlike the man, who lived before *The Event*, the boy was born into this world and has no memory outside of what he currently inhabits. This is something I will address in more detail later in the chapter.

the pair have very little oil, the slutlamp fits their immediate material constraints. However, the energy, once burned, is non-replenishable: the fuel, and thus the light, is always depleting. The world the man constructs via the light, a world made possible by and conveyed through oil, is continuously burning away. What happens when there is no more fuel to keep the lamp lit? The pair are left to either scavenge more oil (the toughest Tough Oil world) or confront a post-oil future. The boy exhibits the capacity to think post-oil (increasingly so as the novel unfolds) but the man is consistently unable to make similar bodily/ideological reforms, even as the light tenuously flickers. As *slow violence* suggests, the construction and growth of fossil fuel modernity is already and at once deconstructing narratives of progress through the onset of environmental toxicity: ecological violence that is not “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as (sic) erupting into instant sensational visibility,” but is rather invisible, “incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2). Every time the lamp burns, it sets material/temporal limitations to both the light itself and the ethics constructed by the man’s.

The man and the boy exhibit one of their first major oil/post-oil divergences in the suburbs and city-scape below. The narrative describes this city as “mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather” (12). The “long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse,” the hushed parking lots, and empty supermarkets, are an uncanny rendering of LeMenager’s “petrotopia,” the once “ordinary U.S. landscape of highways, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service islands, and shopping centers ringed by parking lots and parking towers” (74). The city emblemizes not only the geography of American postwar petroculture, but also the future of that over-consumptive geography. The urban and suburban spaces carved out by “relentless production of space,” are now silent and

unmoving, occupied only by the “mummified dead” (McCarthy, 24). This is a moment of significant affect for the man: he cautiously leads the boy through the streets, his hand on the revolver. He is on-guard because the city is *supposed* to be alive with movement and action. But postwar American urban and suburban spaces are constructed upon oil surplus: no one living is left in the city because the city itself cannot function without oil, and thus cannot sustain any life. In all actuality, they encounter less danger moving through the city streets than they do on “their” rural state highways, yet the man’s expectations of the city dramatically affect his conscious and unconscious actions. He keeps constant watch over the road behind them as they leave the city. His caution is channeled through the space he most associates with danger. This is directly followed by a vital counter-narrative: on the outskirts of the city, the pair come across the man’s boyhood home. The man stops in the road, staring at the house. “Are we going in,” the boy asks. “Why not?” the man replies (McCarthy, 25). Outside of the city, at this particularly home, the man’s restraint lifts momentarily. This is a place he is comfortable with, but for no reason beyond what he associates the house with in his memory. The boy, on the other hand, does not want to go in the house. He is scared. To him, the house represents unknown possible dangers; he, unlike the man, does not associate security and safety with domestic space. The boy reluctantly follows the man inside but is increasingly uncomfortable the longer they remain inside. The man shares details of his early life, “On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework,” but comforting, nostalgic memories only make the boy more nervous (26). On some innate level, the boy understands that the man’s stories are memories of a world that no longer exists. He, not the man, understands the world they actually inhabit.

The narrative, obligated to the road, must pass through the city in order to continue. This is, I argue, in part due to the geographical limitations of the road and in part due to cultural memory. The man still understands the road as a space with purpose: the road imbues their movement with meaning, it gives the impression they are moving towards *something*. The man remembers “in those first few years the roads were peopled with refugees... creedless shells of men tautering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland” (28). But I think it is vitally important that McCarthy leads readers through the city-scape so that we understand what the man is looking to escape. As the effects of slow violence alter seasonality and place-sense, the remaining survivors cling to those spaces that typify sociocultural norms (Buell, 281).¹²⁶ The living become “migrants” drawn to the road in hopes of refuge. A bastardization of Dean Moriarty’s claim in *On The Road*, that “the road must eventually lead to the whole world,” the novel’s refugees hope the road must eventually lead *somewhere* (Kerouac, 231). As there is no “outside” of their apocalyptic situation, the road can only, at best, lead to circumstances of less risk and better chances of survival. Most survivors are left “creedless shells,” empty of purpose left to mindlessly wander the highway. As the man and the boy leave the city, readers are made aware of the man’s intentions, the *somewhere* he hopes the road will lead them to: the coast and the ocean. He reminds himself that “Everything depended on reaching the coast” (29). At the coast, he hopes to find evidence of organic life; he hopes, in other words, that the ocean is vast enough that the novel’s climatological changes cannot disrupt organicism entirely. Yet, even this

¹²⁶ Affect best conveys seasonal change: the perpetual cold, loss of time, seasonal color change replaced by the homogenous gray are all counter to the warm, regular, bright world the man associates with life and renewal. For life to exist, the world must reflect the conditions of life that are, in his mind, foundational to living. “Master metaphors,” human perceptions of environment that Lawrence Buell claims situate nature as a “homeostasis that humanity can ignore but not change,” are interrupted (281). Survivors are forced to confront the dramatic “constructedness and historicity” of “physical environment as eternal constant and the natural order as balance” (281). Buell explains that in shifting our understanding of master metaphors, we are faced with subtly insidious representations, “symptoms, perhaps, of an incipient desire to reshape the environment” (281).

hope is based upon ecological models that are utopian fantasy. LeMenager notes that *Living Oil* finds itself invested in coastal areas because the “problem of materializing oil as coherent narrative” leads consistently into the “problem of materializing water” (184). It makes sense the man would look to the ocean for a thread of organic hope: “Watersheds have long suggested maps of ecologically attuned community for bioregional natural systems,” LeMenager explains. But rivers, watersheds, and oceans “visibly connect us and carry our refuse through time and space.” They are indicators of human impact within biospheres; it makes equal sense why the road can lead the man to the coast.

Roads, thus, illustrate a significant fracture between what humanity perceives to sustain life (petroculture) and what *actually* sustains life. That the novel’s survivors automatically migrate to those spaces responsible for ecological devastation acknowledges a gap in human-environmental contact that cannot be bridged. The road functions as the primary site of this material, cultural, and ecological rupture for two reasons. First, the road facilitates petromodernity’s ideological endurance far beyond the end of oil-petrochemical-capitalism. Roads are seemingly unaffected by the vast disruption of organic life. The man frames loss through cultural memory—“if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory” (18)—*not* through terrestrial deterioration. Though sometimes “macadam,” the roads remain. As mentioned earlier, those surfaces still have practical application: roads are flat, accessible, and networked, making them ideal for travel. The man and boy move faster on blacktop and with less labor (particularly important considering that their survival depends upon stored energies). Roadways allow the pair to cross otherwise impassable natural barriers—high mountain passes or river valleys.¹²⁷ Lastly,

¹²⁷ Moving into the city, the pair crosses a “high concrete bridge” over what is presumably the Tennessee River. Without the bridge, this extremely wide river would be otherwise impossible to cross (24). Newfound Gap, the

the surface grants use of the grocery cart, otherwise impossible to maneuver through accumulated ash off road.¹²⁸ This may seem an inconsequential technology, but it has impact upon both the man's interiority and physiology. The cart allows for material accumulation that supports survival: extra blankets, the tarp, their plastics containers, the slutlamp, a small store of oil, even the boy's toys (7). These items ease day-to-day material anxieties; likewise, the cart minimizes physical labor: rather than carrying these items, the man can push them along. But the cart and the items stored within it are also acculturating devices. These remnants of the prelapsarian oil world continue to hold an important role. The cart counters the pair's metabolic fragility *and* engenders a form of road mobility that carries petroculture ideologies (literally in the basket).

Second, the road signifies rupture by (re)constructing routine and physical motion. Physiologically, the road reorients and trains the man's vision along a specific axis: where the road has been and where the road leads. Like William Least Heat-Moon in *Blue Highways*, who purposefully seeks out those spaces farthest from interstate highway culture—the spaces “in-between”—the man views the “in-between” as non-threatening. He is largely concerned with confrontation directly ahead or behind *on* the road, but very rarely from the left or right *off* the road.¹²⁹ This is, perhaps, the most significant commentary on petroculture's resiliency: that life

pass the pair crosses in the depths of winter, crosses over the mountains at 5000 feet. Again, without the road, climbing the peaks to cross the range would be highly improbable.

¹²⁸ The shopping cart was also a product of oil-driven suburban America, invented to encourage shoppers to purchase more than they would otherwise be able to carry. It thus “disrupted” the temporality of domestic consumption, allowing the consumer to plan and shop for several days' worth of goods instead of going to market daily.

¹²⁹ Interestingly, the narrative describes the first marauder band they encounter as “shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side” (60). I believe this to be a product of predatorial instinct, the learned motion of the postlapsarian hunter. Even so, it seems they do not expect to find other humans to hunt: the raider who stumbles upon the man and the boy is stunned by their encounter. If the marauders were to recognize there is nothing to hunt, they would have to face the reality of their own mortality: that one by one, each will eventually feed the dwindling group.

off the road is so unimaginable, the man visually and subconsciously disregards the possibility. A “chrome motorcycle mirror” attached to the cart allows him to “watch the road behind them” (6). The mirror acknowledges that roads extend both ahead and behind. Further, it reforms bodily, physiological behaviors: glancing at the mirror avoids the physical strain of constantly repositioning the body to observe the road behind them. The mirror attempts to extend the visual spectrum, to train the eye to constantly visualize both the road traveled and the road ahead. However, the mirror emphasizes the man’s imaginative limitations. The man imagines other survivors have the same obligation to the road that he himself experiences. The off-road is not habitable space and therefore causes less anxiety than what lies in front of or behind them on the road. The narrative itself is bound by the same limitations; it is not until the man’s death late in the novel that alternatives to petroculture materialize.

Energy Scarcity: From Sustainability to Cannibalism

Earlier in this chapter, I claimed that *The Road* is not the transformative, transcendental pursuit of individualism that we witness during the midcentury, but rather an ambulate quest for species survival. The shift between these two conditions is an extension of overconsumption historicized through the slow violence of burning fossil fuels. The exuberant trajectory of the 1950s and 60s—when surplus oil and America’s growing petro-infrastructures facilitated imaginative individual possibilities on the road—deviates dramatically when Americans are confronted by notions of scarcity. As I note in Chapter 2, oil scarcity evokes latent anxieties about American identity, environmental stability, and material dependence reflected in art—Raymond Chandler’s cautionary, apprehensive prose or Bruce Springsteen’s aurally jubilant, seething critiques of the American Dream. In spite of Cold War efforts to equate national

stability with oil surplus, validating U.S. military intervention in the Americas, West Africa, and the Middle East, these anxieties only accelerate as mounting evidence of ecological impact sparks environmental controversies: the depleting ozone layer, global climate change, and peak oil.¹³⁰ In ideal circumstances, peak oil alone should be enough to instigate large-scale shifts in energy production. However, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the two primary reactions to oil scarcity—popularization of personal sustainability and the emergence of Tough Oil—place responsibility for ecological health upon the individual while at the same time implementing increasingly experimental, environmentally hazardous technologies to expand extractive opportunities. Faced with disaster, the response to scarcity is not “fundamental changes to human social-life,” as Imre Szeman calls for, but doubling-down: betting it all on black.¹³¹ Fifty years after the first vestiges of petro-anxiety emerge in *On The Road*, the trajectory of American oil consumption, and the means by which to satisfy that consumption, only reify oil economically, socially, and culturally as the primary shaper of human culture and interiority.

The Road depicts the apex of scarcity, wherein extractive technologies not only fail to sustain consumption but the earth itself no longer reproduces the necessities for organic life. The air is so thick with ash, it pollutes the body and partially blocks the sun. Survivors wear masks or handkerchiefs to filter out particulates, but these seem to be largely ineffective.¹³² Plants and animals die en masse. Agriculture is no longer possible. The man and the boy eat whatever they

¹³⁰ The ozone layer crisis stemmed from scientific data claiming chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) had opened a hole in the ozone layer, letting dangerous ultra-violet rays through the atmosphere. Global climate change, initially termed global warming, tracked the globe’s increasing average temperatures. Correlations between rising temperatures and environmental instability have been firmly established within the scientific community. Peak oil hypothesized oil reserves would be unable to match increases in global consumption; in other words, one day, the amount of oil humans could extract and refine would not match the demand. Scientists hypothesized massive resource wars when humanity reached that point.

¹³¹ Szeman writes, “eco-apocalyptic discourse makes it clear that disaster cannot be avoided without fundamental changes to human social-life” (816).

¹³² The man dies from some form of lung disease. It is unclear whether his sickness was a prior condition or is directly caused by air pollution, but we can be certain the ashen air makes it mortal.

can scavenge, usually scraps of petroleum commerce—though once some preserved morel mushrooms and an armful of dessicated apples.¹³³ They *never* eat human flesh. Miraculously, water seems largely consumable, despite the murky color and ashen taste.¹³⁴ Midway through the novel, the man finds a “cistern filled with water so sweet he could smell it” (122). Not only does this water—commonplace, neutral to readers—bear a sweetness, it activates olfaction even *before* gustation. The most ordinary substance evokes extreme pleasure: “Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good” (123). Balanced against the can of Coca-Cola earlier in the novel, we begin to see how scarcity reshapes value and pleasure. The boy’s reaction to the Coke—“It’s really good”—positioned against the man’s sublime response to the cistern water reorients notions of luxury and uniqueness. The ordinary becomes extraordinary.

The Road employs spectacle in the form of cannibalism to address the extreme scarcity of eco-apocalypse. Spectacle is a literary device used throughout science fiction to incite contemporary commentary through alternative worlds. In an effort to continue living, many survivors ironically resort to cannibalism for sustenance. Cannibalism is the novel’s absolute portrayal of unsustainable appetite. Without the earth’s regenerative nature, cannibalism is an evolution of consumption that unavoidably ends in species extinction. Even if people are not consumed immediately, it seems as though they will be at some point. Most importantly, cannibalism echoes midcentury road narratives that intertwine the pursuit of subjectivity and unsustainable appetite. Once part of a cannibal collective, the human becomes food. However,

¹³³ The morels (pg. 40) are particularly interesting because they are edible and distinctive—meaning they can be easily identified and safely eaten, whereas most wild mushrooms tend towards questionably poisonous. Morels have historical links to American colonialism, westward expansion, and self-reliance.

¹³⁴ I find this surprising because one might extrapolate that higher levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere would create a pH imbalance that would affect entire regional watersheds. Interestingly, this had already occurred, before the Event, in the very region the man and boy are traveling. Acid rain has become a serious ecological problem throughout central Appalachia, impacting trout, frog, and plant populations.

survival for the cannibal depends entirely upon fulfilling consumptive patterns formed within the prelapsarian oil world. These patterns cannot be fulfilled in a post-oil world; moreover, cannibalism signifies that prelapsarian consumptive patterns could not be sustained even before the apocalyptic events in the novel occur. *The Road*'s first encounter with cannibalism begins aurally: the sound of a diesel engine down the road. When the truck moves into sight, the man and the boy see it is flocked by marauders. In the ensuing conflict, the man kills a raider moving threateningly towards the boy. Both run blindly from their pursuers, alerted by the pistol shot. Later, the man returns to the scene, once certain "the truck people" have moved on (70). At the site of the shooting, he finds only "dried blood dark in the leaves," but no body (70). In their camp, "in the road itself," are the remnants of a fire: "charred billets of wood lay stuck in the melted tar together with ash and bones" (70). The stew of tar, ash, and bone—where petroculture, environmental decay, and the human melt into one another—is the literal breakdown of corporeal boundaries.¹³⁵ All is ecological decay. Upon closer inspection, the man observes "bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled" (71). The "truck people" express no hesitation eating their dead companion. Group bonding and comradery are replaced with grim expediency. As soon as the raider is dead, he is no longer "human": he is food. But again: what is *most* disturbing is that, long before his death, the raider was already food. Collectivity offers the truck people the illusion of individual difference. Though each may express subjective desires, the faction becomes a herd, each believing s/he will not be the next culled.

¹³⁵ Stacy Alaimo's theory of "transcorporeality" in *Bodily Natures* has strange implications in *The Road*. Her claim, that "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human-world" rings true, but the molecular dissolution and reconstruction of the ash, bone, and tar transforms the loose web of association into a fixed interrelation (Alaimo, 2).

Cannibalism commodifies the body. Human subjectivity remains a vital theme within the road narrative, but the conflict between individualism and collectivity takes on different meaning in *The Road*. Cannibals structure hierarchal power as a reflection of prelapsarian models throughout the text, yet at the same time sacrifice the ethical foundations of humanism by consuming human bodies. The result is reverting back even further: a return to the slave energy regime that preceded fossil fuels. The man and the boy observe this postlapsarian hierarchy from just off the road.¹³⁶ An army of marauders march by: First, men armed with pipes, spears, and lances; Second, slaves pulling wagons, “piled with the goods of war” (92); Third, women, “perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant” (92); Last, a “supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each” (92). In the absence of oil to power labor, slave bodies become engines of resource transport on the road, Pregnant women reproduce the food supply, rather than perpetuate the species. Catamites mollify the desperate pursuit of sensory pleasure. The “human” is a product of function. Further, readers understand that the energy of the flesh will be consumed by other cannibals when the body itself can no longer fulfill other assigned functions. Analogous to petroleum consumption throughout petro-modernity, the resource is consumed to its utter end despite future consequences. This is the clearest structural representation of how power is organized in the postapocalyptic world and by far the largest collective we observe in the novel. Though frightening—“that’s a lot of them, those bad guys,” the boy says (92)—this moment seems less alarming than the encounter with the truck people. The man and the boy hide, but they have now witnessed firsthand the instability of these collectives. This army of cannibals is still just a collection of marauders: a larger mass

¹³⁶ The road itself is a special, material symbol of postlapsarian hierarchies: those with power travel the road freely, while those who do not travel with caution. The man and the boy reject cannibalism, but in so doing make themselves prey to those who exercise power over the road.

only suspends their inevitable extinction. Each distinct body within the hierarchy symbolizes remaining energies and serves a provisional role. Ultimately, each body's energy will be exploited and then consumed. The human body, one of the last remaining "natural resources," is the last remaining commodity.

Cannibalism thus complicates corporeal definitions and biological ethics throughout the novel. Correspondingly, it problematizes contemporary notions of sustainability. Sustainability is not simply monitoring one's individual consumption: it is a global ethical imperative vital to the future of organic life on earth. I am not arguing that McCarthy specifically gestures to the Green Movement or to neoliberal personal sustainability. Here, spectacle allows for heightened commentary: if the inevitable conclusion to unsustainable petrocultures is something as extreme as cannibalism, prevention requires equally radical shifts to current consumptive patterns *and* ethics. As such, cannibalism becomes the central ethical dilemma of the novel. The boy frames the binary very simply: there are "the bad guys" and "the good guys"—cannibals and those who refuse cannibalism. One's diet, then, is the definitive line between evil and good. The boy intrinsically understands the limitations of scarcity, but is adamant they never consume another human:

"We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?"

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we weren't.

I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.

But we wouldn't.

No. We wouldn't.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys. (128-129)

The boy values *others'* lives above all else. He would rather sacrifice himself than contribute to species extinction. This individual inclination sharply critiques the quasi-reflections of petro-consumption practiced by cannibals and the man. Here is a sharp divergence between the man and the boy: though both agree not to cannibalize, their reasons for doing are fundamentally different. The man refuses to cannibalize because to do so would sacrifice the moral, ethical framework he has constructed for the boy. The man's version of humanitarianism, their definition as the "good guys," depends on keeping the boy separate and thus purer than the world they inhabit. Everything he does goes into keeping the boy alive: he would sacrifice anything, including himself, to preserve the boy. However, the man's stories of "courage and justice" manifest differently in the boy. His altruism is "weird," particularly within a world where life and survival are so tenuous that individual need subsumes species. As Timothy Morton writes in *Dark Ecology*, the boy is "something like coexisting," a strange being: "like becoming accustomed to something strange," while also "becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn't become less strange through acclimation" (5). What is strange about the boy, and what makes him distinctly post-oil, is that he has no sense of individualism: he views himself in relationship to the remaining life on earth. The boy is ethically and responsibly intertwined with his world, not as a distinct entity that exists outside of or separately from the desires and hardships of those he coexists with. The man has trouble understanding this because, in spite of his selflessness, his notions of individualism and secure identity have shifted onto the boy. He is not entirely

individualist, but the boy is his “warrant,” and through that justifies actions of preservation. Initially, the boy’s altruism only applies within the strict binary through which the man frames ethics, but by the end of the novel the boy values even the “bad guys” lives above his own (259). His desire to help a lone cannibal versus the man’s anger and disregard marks a crucial ethical divergence.

When the pair investigate a recently abandoned camp, the boy suffers his most horrifying experience in the text: “What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I’m sorry, he whispered. I’m sorry” (198). The “bad guys” first dismember the body to dehumanize the infant, removing the brain (no longer a cognitive being) but more importantly the face before emotional recognition can take place. They are only able to eat the child by eliminating biological instinct that emotionally connects child and parent to perpetuate the species. Thus, by eating the infant, the cannibals relinquish their humanity and accept both personal and species extinction. The image of the child beheaded and gutted has immense emotional impact upon the boy: “He didn’t know if he’d [the boy] ever speak again,” the man thinks (199). The lapse into silence is the boy’s expression of trauma. His reaction—sadness, confusion, and silence—is rooted in genuine sympathy for life, a sympathy that separates him from the consumptive trajectory responsible for the tragedies he witnesses. He apologizes to the man for earlier comments, what he’d said about “those people that got burned up. That were struck in the road and got burned up” (200). The man is confused: “I didn’t know that you said anything bad.” Here is a key difference between the man and the boy: the man views bodies in the road as merely more dead, nothing more than an accumulating number. The boy casually mimics the man’s ethical framework: “What you put in your head is there forever?... They’re

already there... They'll still be there" (190-191). After witnessing and experiencing the charred infant, he apologizes for his lapse in empathy, for underestimating each individual's struggle to survive. He asks where the cannibals found the child, but the man does not answer. "Could there be another one somewhere?" the boy follows. The man does respond this time: "I don't know. It's possible" (200). The man is focused solely on the boy's future; the boy, however, feels the weight of humanity's future.

Conceptions of human subjectivity become a vital distinction then between the oil world the man valorizes and the post-oil world the boy represents (that the man cannot comprehend). Petromodernity forces individual dissolution through systemic participation but it celebrates the pursuit of individualism as a product of petroleum energies. This is the danger of slow violence: when the actions that define selfhood, the daily habits and routines through which we organize and view life, unknowingly contribute to environmental catastrophe. Living a meaningful life, then, is not simply a matter of fulfilling a set of ethical requirements, something the boy intrinsically understands. Living with purpose means valuing life itself, the ethos of coexistence that has the potential to break the grip of liberal ideology that accelerated the commodification and overconsumption of the natural world. *The Road* portrays the extremes of violence and abject horror modern humans are willing to endure in order to continue grasping at security, comfort, and identity. Each character in the novel is afraid of cannibalism's violent threat. The boy's mother, specifically, fears dehumanization more than death or physical violence. The mother views cannibalism as one outcome of larger problem: the forced removal of human subjectivity in response to extreme material scarcity. Though her appearance in the text is brief, she comes to exemplify the anxieties of unsustainable consumption. Accelerated models of commodification and overconsumption as what make the pursuit of individual identity possible,

yet absolute commitment to systemic overconsumption threatens the very existence of organic futures. Her suicide is an attempt to retain her own subjectivity through action. "Sooner or later," she says, "they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him [the boy]. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it" (56). In choosing to take her own life, she retains control of the actions of her mind and body. At the same time, her death is the result of a lost world, a lost identity largely built upon oil's sociocultural optimisms and that cannot be reclaimed in the absence of material resources. Her death is both a final act of human agency and a reaction to futility. Rather than be stripped of what little of herself remains, she determines her own trajectory. The importance of individual subjectivity is reinforced when she does not kill the boy. "I'd take him with me if it weren't for you," she says, but this seems an insincere attempt to convey her austerity (56). Killing the boy would deny him the same agency, the same subjectivity that she claims in death. At the same time, her suicide acknowledges how important identity is in shaping conscious and subconscious actions and how deeply rooted her identity is individual subjectivity. She cannot take the boy's life because it would force upon him the same conditions she most fears, but in leaving him, she confirms just how difficult it is to think outside the framework of oil liberalism. Compared to the man's perseverance, her suicide initially seems shameful. In one way, her actions comprise one the novel's first off-road ethics: anticipating the future, she assumes agency and, through that agency, secure identity off the road, in death. However, it seems more valuable to view her death as yet another variation of the novel's on-and-off-road ethics: the mother, so entrenched in oil that life itself seems impossible without it; the man, suffering from petromelancholia, who works for nothing more than to reinstitute the securities of his "easy oil" world and, thus, provide a future for the boy (but an oil future, nonetheless); and the boy, inevitably influenced by the man's oil ethics but distinctly

separate from *both* the mother and the man's forms of selfhood. The mother and the man actualize their anxieties differently, but inevitably they suffer from the same foundational problem: neither can imagine a future that is not secured by petroleum energy.

The plantation home—the novel's true hellscape—is the realization of the mother's fears. Here, cannibalism is planned and tactical. It is a repulsive and, at times, ingenious reorientation of 'hunter and prey' filtered through scarcity and made possible by topology, technology, and egregious dehumanization. Starving and desperate the pair glimpse a "once grand house sited on a rise above the road" (105). "What is this place, Papa?" the boy asks, confused by the plantation home's opulence: "tall and stately with doric white columns... a port cochere at the side. A gravel drive that curved up through a field of dead grass. The windows were oddly still intact" (105). "I don't think we should go up there," the boy repeats several times, but the man insists. "They'd had no food and little sleep in five days," worried about the boy, already "so thin... [a] taut face and hollow eyes" (103). Need obfuscates ways in which the road has shaped the man's postlapsarian interiority. Similar to the confusion earlier at the man's childhood home, the boy instinctually senses danger. "Papa let's not go up there," he says, but the man forgoes his usual caution. Starvation, the threat of the boy's death, overwhelms his vigilance. "It's okay. We have to take a look," he replies (106). Rather than sustenance, the pair find a locked basement full of people, penned like animals. The man quickly realizes the plantation home is not a sanctuary: it is a cage. As they sprint away from the house, the man observes "four bearded men and two women" moving toward them, a family of hunters that prey upon migrants traveling the road (111).

Petroaffect works upon the hunters' interiority through both scarcity and the spatial presence of the road. The plantation home itself signifies an enduring commitment to

petroinfrastructure, purposefully implemented through the framework of eco-apocalypse. The six cannibals who occupy the plantation home are not refugees or migrants; rather, they have taken shelter as hunters, using the road as a game trail. The “once grand” home is “sited on a rise above the road,” a vantage point that extends vision and provides the hunter with topological advantage. After their escape, the man recalls, “coming through the canebrake into the road he’d seen a box. A thing like a child’s playhouse. He realized it was where they lay watching the road. Lying in wait and ringing the bell in the house for their companions to come” (115). The hunters stalk travelers with systematic productivity, using the home and surrounding landscape to monitor and capture unwary prey. Through a perversion of Cartesian dualism, the hunters dehumanize travelers on the road to justify their capture and eventual consumption. Migrants “on the road” are drifters without purpose, thus validating them as a food source. The effects of petroaffect, the hunters’ ability to construct a home reminiscent of the midcentury suburban nuclear family home, their ethical laxity, or even their construction of a more sustainable slaughterhouse/kitchen, gesture to the road’s proximal influence and petroculture’s imaginative resiliency in shaping what postlapsarian life ought to look like. The road is a post-apocalyptic hunting trail, the plantation home a tree-stand. Their prey is sealed in the basement; when the man and the boy open the locked door they see several bodies, “all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands,” and a man on a mattress “with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (110). The basement is a pen, a slaughterhouse where human agency is violently stripped away (a graphic, horrifying realization of the mother’s greatest fear). One of the trapped bodies pleads for help: “Please, he called. Please” (111). Unlike the mother, this body has no agency; though it cries for help, the man and the boy rush from the house in fear.

The hunters, who live just “off the road,” illustrate the road’s continued duality: a space acted upon by the living, yet a space acting upon the living as well.

In this instance, the pair is lucky to survive: had the box in the canebrake been occupied, the man and the boy would have no doubt been captured and thrown into the basement slaughterhouse. The plantation home is stationary, indicating an evolution of the randomized cannibalistic acts perpetrated by the “truck people.” This site suggests an organized attempt to construct a warped version of the prelapsarian world, gathering and storing resources for future use. The man observes a “forty gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs,” now used, presumably, to render human bodies (109). Nearby, there is a “small wagon with rubber tires” (109). The wagon hauls bodies from the house to the cauldron, one stage in what amounts to an assembly line to maximize efficiency. The amputated man in the basement, with his “stumps... blackened and burnt,” seems almost a perverse effort at sustainability, where commodity (the human body) can be preserved for a period of time and utilized to its fullest. However, the man and the boy’s luck could also be an indication of dwindling commodity. Cannibalism depletes bodies with no hope of regeneration. This becomes clear as the novel progresses and random encounters on the road are less frequent. As “game” becomes scarce, the hunters may have to seek out supplementary hunting grounds.

Ultimately, cannibalism as spectacle emphasizes and focuses ecological instability through objectionable ethics. Unless you are reliving *Typee*, modern citizens understand cannibalism as morally objectionable. In turn, the text urges readers to reevaluate consumption that does not *seem* spectacular but equally contributes to ecological instability. Global climate change, atmospheric destabilization, and species extinction—all consequences of slow violence brought on by the acceleration of oil capitalism—make clear that conventional oil consumption,

too, has the force of an ethical imperative. Andrew Nikiforuk states, “petroleum companies and petrostate leaders... claim they have bettered civilization with fossil fuels” (xi). He goes on to explain that industrial modernity’s reliance on fossil fuels (particularly oil) renders humans hopelessly bound to finite, volatile energies. As the successor to oil capitalism, cannibalism is the final/finite energy regime, the epochal conclusion of the Anthropocene.

That the first encounter with cannibalism in the novel is anticipated by the uncanny sound of a diesel engine presciently correlates cannibalism and petroculture. The truck suggests these “bad guys” are either unable or unwilling to go “off road.” Whether this is due to lack of imagination or bleak futility, the “truck people” are unable to acknowledge humans as perpetrators of slow violence, as contributors to eco-apocalypse rather than as victims of environmental circumstance. Even the man, one of the “good guys,” has trouble rationalizing humanity’s accountability. He recalls the earliest days after The Event:

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes.

Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it. (33)

Environmental collapse is mirrored in the corrosion of humanism. The man is certain others will “come to help” those most immediately affected, “half immolate and smoking in their clothes” (33). However, he admits his own unwillingness to help those “failed sectarian suicides,” in favor of protecting his wife and child. The smoking bodies represent eco-apocalypse’s first

victims, but they equally represent petroculture's promotion of self-reliance and individual security. The dead were unable to help themselves; the man owes them nothing, whereas preserving/protecting his nuclear family comes all the way back to midcentury and 1970s masculine road narratives that purport patriarchy through petroleum. Whether the man's last vestige of faith in humanity or purposeful neglect validated by the boy, he too is implicated in the disaster. Oil capitalism and ecological communities both implode; in turn, petromodernity rapidly deteriorates, quickly followed by prelapsarian sociocultural stability. In just a year, society devolves into murderous "bloodcults," burning "balefires" on mountain ridges and mounting sacrifices along the roads where the remaining migrant survivors slowly die (16). Yet, this devolution occurs in the desperate attempt to reinstitute what had been lost: the promise of security and ease that predicate petromodernity. Years later, the man looks out over the mountains and notices there are "no more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the bloodcults must have finally all consumed one another" (16). The most emphatic consumers, those most desperate to retain their status within petroculture and thus drawn quickest to cannibalism, are the quickest to outstrip production. The spectacular violence, the untenable appetites implicate cannibalistic overconsumption as evil, but more importantly as unrepentant. It is in cannibalism's unrepentance that *The Road* condemns petroculture. Collapse occurs because humanity refuses to change. Cannibalism is the symptom that points back towards, and revealingly defamiliarizes, the cause: overconsumption.

The man frames eco-apocalypse in terms of "crime" and "punishment." The question, "What had they done?" could be in reference to the spiked bodies that line the road. However, the man seems to gesture towards a larger allegation: what had *they*, humanity, done to deserve this atrocity? He attempts to humanize disaster, to frame eco-apocalypse through human

understandings of justice, rather than as a planetary reaction to atmospheric chemical imbalance. And whether or not the apocalyptic events in the novel are the result of cosmic accident or anthropogenic in kind, the man's ethical framework suggests how easily we might overlook exploitation in ordinary habits and mundane behaviors. Likewise, cannibalism illustrates humanity's unrepentant refusal to acknowledge how petroculture's consumptive patterns, though perhaps not the primary instigator of eco-apocalypse, nonetheless perpetuate eco-apocalyptic conditions. Measuring punishment against crime refuses to acknowledge the possibility that crime itself might manifest differently in non-human nature. Though the man evokes the "history of the world," he lacks the temporal capacity to imagine the magnitude of slow violence. What I mean specifically is that, in the face of planetary change, the novel's characters cling to the same exploitative consumptive patterns that were only made possible in the prelapsarian-era by surplus material resources. The root cause of eco-apocalypse is exploitative environmental contact. The boy exhibits the sharpest deviation from petroculture's gross overconsumption and he is, as far as we know, the only character in the text who was not habituated by petroculture. "What had they done?" They did everything.

Climate Destabilization and the (un)Oxygenated World or Science Reality, not Science Fiction

The Road poses important questions concerning the present, current world by exploring consumptive consequences, shifts in ontology, and planetary change visualized through an alternative future. What are the costs of oil capitalism if left unchecked? Where do we observe the consequences of petro-modernity? How does petroculture endure through eco-apocalypse? As noted, the text addresses petroculture's resiliency time and time again: the road itself bounds the novel's setting and its characters. Cannibalism forecasts the cost of consumption-out-of-

control. Climate destabilization, however, is the most pervasive environmental phenomenon associated with petroculture to appear in the text. McCarthy subtly addresses climate destabilization through affect and sensual perception, rather than the abject horror of cannibalism. Extrapolating from trending CO₂ emissions, *The Road* illustrates the consequences of atmospheric imbalance to invite readerly recognition of the slow violence of fossil fuel emissions.¹³⁷ Over millennia, chemical percentages in the atmosphere shift in response to natural events that result in global cooling and warming as the planet attempts to reach a molecular, chemical balance.¹³⁸ Currently, the earth's atmosphere consists of roughly 21 percent oxygen; however, atmospheric CO₂ levels are higher than at any other point in recorded history and rising annually as a result of fossil fuel emissions. In *The Road*, we witness firsthand the effects of atmospheric destabilization on a planetary scale. For one thing, it sparks a disastrous chain of extinctions. Throughout the novel, there is no mention of rodents, birds, reptiles, or insects outside of the man's memory.¹³⁹ All plant life has died, reduced to "ashen effigies" (276). The filtered sunlight makes agriculture impossible. Animals have either been hunted to extinction or have died out from starvation and natural disaster. Presumably microbes still live inside humans (gut microbes that assist digestion, for instance). Both the man and the boy contract infections

¹³⁷ Per NASA: "Ancient air bubbles trapped in ice enable us to step back in time and see what Earth's atmosphere, and climate, were like in the distant past. They tell us that levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere are higher than they have been at any time in the past 400,000 years. During ice ages, CO₂ levels were around 200 parts per million (ppm), and during the warmer interglacial periods, they hovered around 280 ppm (see fluctuations in the graph). In 2013, CO₂ levels [surpassed 400 ppm](#) for the first time in recorded history. This [recent relentless rise](#) in CO₂ shows a remarkably constant relationship with fossil-fuel burning, and can be well accounted for based on the simple premise that about 60 percent of fossil-fuel emissions stay in the air" ([NASA](#)).

¹³⁸ See Carl Zimmer's "The Mystery of Earth's Oxygen" (Zimmer).

¹³⁹ Laura Godfrey notes that "greener landscapes" in *The Road* are "experienced only from the inside" of memory and dream (Godfrey, 165). The man, for instance, wakes from dreams of light and life: "In the nights sometimes now he'd wake in the black and freezing waste out of softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun" (272). Ecologically attuned communities in the novel exist only in memory, though I would also contend that these memories are inherently nostalgic, tainted by the man's petromelancholia. After all, any environment, even one irrevocably tainted by petromodernity, is better than no environment.

for a short period, indicating some viral/bacterial-level life, but life outside of human beings is, at best, microscopic (at worst, extinct). It is vitally important to recognize that survivors in the novel are relegated to scavenging and cannibalism because the environment cannot sustain the human food chain.

The irrevocable destruction of terrestrial environments prompts two vital textual questions: First, why is the man so determined to make it to the coast? And second, what is McCarthy's intent in leading readers to the ocean? If the road is fundamentally tied to terrestrial lands—the barren, fired landscape like that of the Smoky Mountain region after the Sevier County Fires—then it seems of upmost importance *The Road* ends at the coast, with water. The novel undergoes a similar realization to LeMenager's recognition of water as central to materializing oil. LeMenager proposes that water, "rivers or the oceans and groundwater," suggests "a narrative through-line from which to see oil, and its possible futures, more clearly" (184). I argue that McCarthy directs the man to the coast because oceans are indicators of global ecology. Ocean gyres have major impact on climatology: changes in sea level, ocean currents, and seawater temperatures have been leading indicators of petromodernity's contributions to twentieth-century atmospheric imbalances. In the epilogue to *Slow Violence*, Nixon addresses oceanic change to link petroculture to global climate change, subsidence, and neoliberal resource extractions: "we face the prospect of expanded suboceanic carbon reserves being extracted and burned courtesy of global warming, accelerating the very process of slow violence that... unchecked, will ultimately breach the walls that concretize our planetary delusion... [to] separate out orderly societies from those abandoned to destitution and climate chaos" (Nixon, 267).¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Nixon focuses specifically on Maldives, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean that suffers from extreme subsidence that threatens to drown the entire country.

Though the “underwater scene” of *The Road* is difficult to visualize, it arguably harbors the effects of global climate change even more immediately than terrestrial lands (268).

Oceans are unfathomably large biomes. Part of the reason we cannot visualize oceanic slow violence is because the vastness of the oceans seems beyond the scope of human impact. I argue this is one reason the man directs them to the coast. The distinctiveness of aquatic life, perpetual motion of the waves and currents, and immense volume give the impression that oceans are permanent and regenerative—where imbalance is filtered out and material made new. Everything depends on reaching the coast because the man hopes the ocean is immune to ecological devastation (29). He notes he is “placing hopes where he’d no reason to” (213). He simply hopes it will “be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily” (213). Biologically, a “brighter” world indicates more sunlight and, therein, the basics for photosynthesis and atmospheric stability. Photosynthesis would be the most basic counter to atmospheric imbalance.¹⁴¹ Nearly 70% of the earth’s oxygen is produced by oceanic life: phytoplankton, algae, and other water plants. The once “rich lands” that line the road are now lifeless and unproductive; if terrestrial life has failed, perhaps life still exists in the oceans (199). Even if that life is microscopic, it would lend hope to restoring chemical balances in the atmosphere. Sunlight gleaming off the ocean surface would mean a “brighter” world and thus a brighter future. We are similarly affected in our contemporary world:

Their commitment to the road intensifies as they get closer to the coast. The man measures their mileage to the coast on the oilcompany map with a piece of string (199).

Correspondingly, he portions their food to account for that distance (182). He knows “the names

¹⁴¹ Photosynthesis converts CO₂ and sunlight into chemical energy and releases oxygen as a byproduct. If photosynthesis can no longer filter carbon from the atmosphere in the world of the novel, then oxygen is slowly depleting from the planet.

of towns and rivers by heart” and measures their “progress daily,” reminiscent of Enlightenment and oil-era temporality (215). These small moments convey how clearly the man associates the road with stability and purpose, so much so that he discounts any notion of reaching the coast through alternative routes. Further, these actions convey the man’s deeply affective need to believe that existence is teleological. Traveling *somewhere* (to the coast) is as important to him as movement is in itself. The road is habitually and textually intertwined with hope for species survival, which, for the man, represents a purpose, a destination.

The boy mimics the man, standing in the road holding the map to further orient them (215). But even this gesture reflects the man’s ideology, not a manifestation of the boy’s post-oil strangeness. The boy’s commitment to the road is not as absolute as the man’s. After passing through the mountains, he begins to imagine alternative routes. The man estimates at one point they are “about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies” (156). The boy is unable to contextualize the idiom, having never before seen a crow:

As the crow flies?

Yes. It means going in a straight line.

Are we going to get there soon?

Not real soon. Pretty soon. We’re not going as the crow flies.

Because crows don’t have to follow roads?

Yes.

They can go wherever they want.

Yes. (156-157)

Unlike the crow, the man and the boy cannot go “wherever they want.” It seems curious to the boy, who has been on the road his entire life. Imagining life off the road is as outlandish to him

as the idea of crows flying to Mars is to the reader (157). The man explains that a crow cannot fly to Mars because there is no atmosphere in space and because “they wouldn’t know where Mars was” (157). The dramatic irony here is palpable. First, the man does not recognize how closely he and the boy, living amidst their own destabilized atmosphere, resemble the imagined crows. Crows cannot fly to Mars because there is no oxygen in space, but oxygen in their own atmosphere is slowly depleting. Second, the man implies the crows would be lost because crows do not have maps to direct their movement. He does have a map and, through the map, direction and purpose. What he forgets (or refuses to acknowledge) is he and the boy are both crows of their own like, flying to the coast. Their world, like Mars, will be similarly uninhabitable. Likewise, crows are extinct not because they lacked maps, but because humanity depends so greatly upon the maps of petromodernity. This crucial juxtaposition between the man and the boy’s perception of environment gestures to the boy’s maturation. Initially, the boy’s question seems absurd, denying the physics of the universe that the man more clearly understands. Yet, the man’s inability to evolve as the boy does confines him to both prelapsarian thought structures and petro-infrastructures. The boy, though he does not understand the sciences involved, conceptualizes life beyond the boundaries of the Earth.

The road does eventually lead to the coast, only to reveal global contamination. The gray half-light continues as the pair trudges through barren lands, nearing the coast. First, the air shifts: a “salt wind” blowing in from the east (215). Then the land flattens and they hear the ocean faintly in the distance. After one final turn in the road, they finally see their destination: “gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. Out on the tidal flats

lay a tanker half careened. Beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash” (215).

It is immediately clear the ocean has been as corrupted as terrestrial land. This ocean is vast and constant but neither inviting nor reassuring: it is not the ocean the man was hoping to find. It is windy, “Cold. Desolate. Birdless” (215). There are no crustaceans scuttling through the sand, no dune grasses curled over in the breeze. The “gray beach” continues the same terrestrial color scheme the man was hoping to escape, with no more sunlight filtering through the ash than there had been in the mountains. He observes a pile of “saltbleached ribcages” down the beach, but no life beyond himself and the boy. It is an “alien sea”: an indicator of global ecological ruin that all but guarantees species extinction. Further, we are made to understand that petro-modernity is at the root of the novel’s environmental conflict. That the horizon is dominated by the tanker while the ocean water itself resembles “slag” seems extremely pointed: the wreck and ruin man and boy observe is implicitly connected to the slow violence of anthropogenic global climate change.¹⁴² The ocean, heaving like a “vat of slag,” suggests a strange viscosity to the water, as if thickened by toxic byproducts and ash. The looming image of the hulking, half-careened tanker seems a fitting end to oil capitalism but demonstrates the enduring consequences of petroculture. Here, the text almost tells us: *this*, this is what ruined the world.

Given the extent of ecological disaster at the coast, why is McCarthy so intent on taking his readers to the ocean? We know the man is drawn to the coast to assess the extent of environmental ruin. Does McCarthy drag us alongside the man simply to reinforce the possible consequences of unmitigated late-century oil capitalism? In part, yes: oceanic devastation

¹⁴² Slag is a highly toxic mining byproduct. It is dark black and resembles coarse, angular sand. Again, the implication here is that the water does not *look* right. It seems the wrong color and consistency. That the ocean has been thus affected is a confirmation of the man’s worst fears.

already in our era hammers home global eco-apocalypse as one possible future if petromodernity is left unchecked. This, however, seems *too* simple. In visualizing eco-disaster via the half-careened oil tanker and slag-like ocean waters, McCarthy complicates science-fiction as conceptualizations of imagined futures. The half-careened oil tanker evokes images of our current petro-moment: from the 1979 Santa Barbara oil spill to the Exxon *Valdez*, *Deepwater Horizon*, and Standing Rock. McCarthy (re)visualizes the cultural history of oil spills to at once remind us of petro-modernity's *current* ecological violence and to play upon the reader's emotional response to similar events.¹⁴³ In other words, this is not just an alternative world: it is also an image of *our* world. Likewise, this is not simply an imaginative future caused by unknown events: it is a way to visualize the result of events and actions we *currently* experience and contribute to. For the man and the boy, coastal ruin prompts ethical concerns: if humanity is doomed, living a meaningful life demands a rigorous moral imperative. For readers, the text begins to build towards a wakeup call: if we want to avoid the man and the boy's future, we need to change direction.

The arrival at the coast is the turning point in the novel. Here, at what ought to be the end of the road, I argue McCarthy (re)deploys affect and sensual perception as a way of linking and reorienting purpose, pleasure, and futurity in response to eco-apocalypse. Throughout the novel, McCarthy utilizes readerly affect to convey the extent of environmental ruin. Subtle evocations of sensual perception—darkness, cold, hunger, silence—help readers *feel* the setting (Weik von Mossner, 1-3). Mossner explains that “sensual perceptions... the feel of air so cold that the ‘ashen daylight’ appears to harden and turn to ice, the touching of the child’s chest, the stink of

¹⁴³ Here, I am thinking specifically of the Exxon *Valdez* spill. The spill was ecologically devastating, yet the lasting impact of the event is in the visibility of the disaster itself: oil soaked birds dying in pools of crude, pristine Alaskan coastline drenched in viscous oil. In *Living Oil*, LeMenager argues the 1979 Santa Barbara oil spill off the coast of California had a similar effect with wider cultural response because of visual media.

their dirty clothes, and the utter lack of natural sounds” each contribute to “readers’ understanding that this environment is dead, lacking sunlight, warmth, life, devoid of food and potentially lethal.” These evocations awaken sensual perception and embodied cognition that are “of particular relevance for our (sic) theoretical and practical investigations of environmental narratives and the emotional responses they cue in readers and viewers” (Weik von Mossner, 2-3). The man and the boy are perpetually cold, the boy at times “shuddering violently” against the man’s body (67). The ashen air darkens the sky and covers the ground, shrouding the world in filtered, gray light. Each time the man glances the countryside with his binoculars, he sees only gray ash and colorless dead fields (89). Sound is largely unvarying noise: rain falling on ruined aluminum roofs, the cart’s wheels pushing through ash and snow, the dull roar of an earthquake (28). Sensory indicators delicately evoke a devastated world, a world we cannot relate to experientially but that we recognize geographically. We feel sadness and regret when we realize/recognize that McCarthy’s alternative world is *our* world—or could be. These are *real* places, authentic interactions rendered uncanny to modern readers by drastic changes to environment. McCarthy is meticulous in his mapping. Further, he periodizes the text through place and commodity (Morgan).¹⁴⁴ It is important that *The Road* is an alternative imaging of our own world because it questions our own environmental contact. The foundations of modern life, the actions, products, and places that construct our daily existence are more fragile than we know. In the reader’s “*other than* conscious knowing,” the motion of emotion brings us into confrontation with the personal, political, and ultimately environmental consequences of petromodernity (Gregg, 1). These consequences are deeply rooted in our consumptive patterns but difficult to recognize because they are woven into our ideologies of selfhood, mobility, and

¹⁴⁴ In “The Routes and Roots of *The Road*,” Wes Morgan traces the text’s routes and period better than I could ever hope to do.

freedom. Ecological decay acts almost imperceptibly upon the reader through affect, particularly when set against the abject horror of cannibalism.

Despite oceanic devastation, the boy admits that he likes the coast and the sea (217). This seems an odd reaction given the repercussions of environmental disaster, but as the forest fire early in the novel does for the man, the sea stirs something within the boy and thus stirs something within the reader. McCarthy uses the boy's affectual experience to convey a sense of pleasure that exists along and outside of species survival. The ruined sea is visually disappointing initially. While the man had made no promises to the boy about the ocean's color, the gray surface is anticlimactic: "he could see disappointment in his face. I'm sorry it's not blue, he said. That's okay, said the boy" (215). The man hopes that color—a blue ocean—might visually overwhelm the gray ashen road and spark an emotional reaction; again, a "brighter world" equals a brighter future. Yet, even without the blue, there is some sense of affectual awakening: the boy does not need the color to engage this place because he already engages place differently than the man ever could. Both are entranced by the ocean's difference: "an hour later they were sitting on the beach and staring out at the wall of smog across the horizon. They sat with their heels dug into the sand and watched the bleak sea wash up at their feet" (215). They sit and watch for a long time (216). Finally, the boy asks if he can go swimming. "Swimming?" says the man, surprised, "You'll freeze your tokus off" (217). In spite of the cold, the boy runs, "naked and leaping and screaming into the slow roll of the surf," one of the few moments of outright pleasure and self-indulgence within the text outside of the bunker. The boy finally comes back up the beach, shuddering in a blanket and crying. "What is it? he said? Nothing. No, tell me. Nothing. It's nothing" (218). The tears are due to in part physical discomfort (the extreme cold) but likely also in part to emotional release. Splashing through the

ocean waves is unlike anything the boy has experienced. The *feeling* of the water, the sensation of playing in the waves is so alien he cannot even describe it.

Environmental affect points to separate ethical and imaginative futures for the two characters. The man and the boy experience the coast very differently. Both acknowledge the temporal limitations of life on the planet, but the boy continues to wonder if life is possible elsewhere:

There could be people alive someplace else.

Whereplace else?

I don't know. Anywhere.

You mean besides earth?

Yes.

I don't think so. They couldn't live anyplace else. (244)

The germ of life off the road originates in the imagination of the extraterrestrial. The man's casual dismissal reflects his imaginative limitations. Likewise, I see this as an example of petro-affect: theoretically, with enough energy and material resources, life certainly is possible elsewhere. The man would know that humans have been off-world before but doing so requires technologies and massive amounts of fuel that humans no longer have access to. More importantly, I feel this is a directive from McCarthy: there is no off-world, but there is the off-road. When the coast fails, the man's teleology begins to crumble. He is convinced he must keep moving south, but the movement lacks purpose. For the first time in the novel, the man is directionless; perhaps it is time to consider alternatives? "I don't know what we're doing," the boy says, a rare moment of questioning (244). This lack is reflected in the man's increasingly fragile physical state. His cough worsens, a suggestion the atmosphere is every day toxifying:

“he walked up the beach, his long shadow reaching over the sands before him, sawing about with the wind in the fire. Coughing. Coughing. He bent over, holding his knees. Taste of blood” (237). “Everyday is a lie,” he says to himself, “but you are dying. That is not a lie” (238). Similarly, the boy gets sick, so sick the man wonders if he might die: “I will do what I promised, he whispered. No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone” (248). In their most tenuous moment, the man recommits to the highway. “There are people,” he tells the boy, “There are people and we’ll find them. You’ll see” (244). His motivation, to protect the boy and provide a future for him, is still only imaginable on the road. The off-road eludes him.

Returning to the road does not relegate the boy to the same ethical framework as the man. The boy, who once so simply defined the novel’s ethical boundaries between “good guys” and “bad guys,” begins to firmly conceive his own morality and, more importantly, act upon it. He understands that actions, not stories, define their ethics. The boy’s evolving morality and the man’s ethical framework are tested when their cart is stolen. Where once the road represented their home, there is now apprehension and unfamiliarity. “Don’t step in the road,” the man tells the boy, fearing the sand from their shoes will impede their ability to track the thief (254). While tactical, his warning also seems prescient counsel: by returning to the road, they must recommit to the same ethical and hierarchical structures they hoped to escape at the coast. The man quickly reverts back to material accumulation; thus, the theft of the cart is an extreme crime. The thief is a single escaped cannibal, “an outcast from one of the communes” easily identified by several missing fingers on his right hand (255). The man is so enraged, he orders the marauder to strip down by threat of the pistol. They would assuredly die without the cart (255). Further, the marauder is a cannibal and thief: his missing fingers *clearly* mark him as one of the “bad guys.” They leave him, a “nude and slatlike creature standing in the road shivering and hugging

himself” (258). According to his code, his “warrant” to protect the boy at all costs, the man is ethically justified in his action.

“What do you think would have happened to us if we hadn’t caught him?” he asks the boy (258), who knows as well as the man that had they not caught him, they would die. Still, the boy cries in protest: “He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die” (259). The boy wants to help him. He understands the severity of the marauders’ crimes, having been witness to them his entire life. Yet the boy’s empathy and value for life outweigh the thief’s offenses. The strangeness he embodies, his “coexistence,” is not justified in the teleological pursuit of happiness or security, it isn’t even in the notion of species survival. Indeed, Morton tells us that there is something wrong with the pursuit of happiness from the very beginning: More happiness is better, such that more existing, despite how I appear (starving, oppressed), is better. We could compress this idea: *happiness as existing for the sake of existing*” (53). How does one exist for reasons other than the “sake of existing?” For the boy, this amounts to heightened empathy. It manifests not by definition of the world around him but in relation to that world. The marauder is not just a marauder: he is also a human. He is hungry or lonely or desperate or dying. The man explains he never intended “to kill him” (260). “But we did kill him,” the boy responds (260). The boy recognizes leaving the marauder without food or clothing condemns him to death. Perhaps more pointedly: in indirectly condemning the marauder to death, the man eliminates any possibility of reaching out to the marauder again. Like the plantation hunters, he strips him: not just of his clothes, but his humanity as well. The man already views cannibals as irredeemable. But how can the man’s ethical structure be so rigid if they never help anyone? The boy does not want to listen to the man’s stories anymore because his stories are not true (268). “In the stories,” the boy explains, “we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (268). The stories,

and thus the culture transmitted by lamplight, are lies: without action, the stories can never be true. The boy understands that the refuge the man is in search of is an illusion; that, rather, they create that world by exercising empathy and compassion. The man is frustrated by the boy's reaction. "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," he says, implying again that material accumulation, personal safety, and direction is essential to survival on the road (259). The boy's response—"Yes I am, he said. I am the one"—shifts focus away from simply surviving for survival's sake to living with ethical, humanitarian purpose.

The last course of the novel is heavily toned with a sense of doom and hopelessness. The longer the two travel the road, the worse these feelings become. Once we understand the road does not lead somewhere, the text fully embraces the affect of eco-apocalypse. The environment further deteriorates. Rain and wind dominate the weather. There are no sublime moments, no reminders of life. The remaining memorials of the green world that was, a "vast low swale where ferns and hydrangeas and wild orchids lived on in ashen effigies which the wind had not yet touched," now only reflect the inevitability of organic decline. Affect can do little but mirror ecological decay in passages like the following, when the days slough by "uncounted and uncalendared," the "night dead still and deader black" (273). The road becomes increasingly less negotiable, obstructed by the remnants of petromodernity: abandoned cars, toppled buildings, and "skeins of wire from the roadside poles garbled like knitting" (274). So much debris covers the surface, they have to abandon the cart, opting instead for a large canvas bag and a small suitcase scavenged from the wreckage (274-275). The man's absolute commitment to the road supersedes even his focus on material accumulation. Whereas once bridges made it possible to traverse otherwise impassable boundaries, they now lie "collapsed in the slow moving water" (275). The coastal highway gets more dangerous and unpredictable the farther south they travel.

The pair are surprise-attacked in a town, sniped by bow and arrow from a high window. The man is struck through the leg; though he patches the wound as best he can using a first-aid kit acquired at the coast, it is clearly debilitating. At the same time, his cough worsens, now frequently accompanied by “bloody drool” and “spitting blood” (273). He has to rest more frequently. Reminiscent of the marauders from earlier in the novel, the man is described as “slumping along. Filthy, ragged, hopeless” (273). After the failures at the coast, the justifications for sticking to the road quickly lose viability. The cold, dark, painful senses that define the affectual tone of the novel become overwhelming, increasingly inescapable. And yet: the pair continues traveling the highway.¹⁴⁵

The man’s sickness and suffering peak while he observes a long stretch of interstate highway, “long lines of charred and rusting cars. The raw rims of the wheels sitting in a stiff gray sludge of melted rubber, in blackened rings of wire” (273). Whereas once cars and debris were infrequent and easily avoidable on the road (in fact, sometimes helpful), the southern highways late in the novel are increasingly dominated by the remnants of petro-modernity. Images of the material misuse responsible for eco-apocalypse reflect the man’s deteriorating physical state, not yet one of the “incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child and propped on the bare springs of the seats” but moving there quickly. In perhaps the most damning sentence in the novel, the man spies the line of cars stretching into the distance and thinks of the “ten thousand dreams ensepulchered within their crozzeled hearts” (273). The dreams, American dreams that always were and still remain escapist fantasies, are forever trapped within the blackened corpses of the dead. More importantly, the dreams are “ensepulchered” within the cars, the automobiles now

¹⁴⁵ This is in part due to the man’s continuing commitment to the road and petroculture, but it is also in part due to the difficulty traveling inland. Late in the novel, the pair cross roughly ten miles of ashen forest and grassy lowlands. “Their progress was a torture,” the text notes, and they sit down to rest on the very next road they reach.

literally fused to the road. Not only are these dreams proven to be false fantasies through the dreamers death or ecological decay, but the technologies and materials, the cars, fuel, the tires, that were supposed to deliver those dreams are momentos of that false hope. We can assume that petromodernity has shaped not only the dreams themselves—dreams of freedom, mobility, and security—but also the material pursuit of those dreams. The line of cars filled with the dead conveys large-scale sociocultural failure to emancipate the individual from regimatic energies that cannot deliver the material and transcendental progress promised by and within oil. These are individual, human dreams but dreams inevitably delimited by the systems of oil capitalism.

On the Road or Off the Road?

In the last pages of the novel, it becomes clear that the central conflict of the text is whether to be on the road or off the road. Conceptually, the road represents a path that has already led to failure and ruin. For almost the entirety of the novel, the text is bounded by road—only in the man’s death is the text (and the boy) able to deliberate an alternative off-road. Continuing on the road or diverging from it implies a commitment to or dismissal of petroculture that has distinct impact upon the traveler’s ethics, interiority, and environmental contact. As the man dies, he tells the boy he must continue on: “You need to go on, he said. I can’t go with you. You need to keep going. You don’t know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. You’ll see. Just go. It’s all right... Keep going south. Do everything the way we did it” (278). Here, he acknowledges some level of chance in their movement; luck has defined them as much as the man’s teleology. Which is why the man’s final declaration, to “Do everything the way we did it,” is so problematic. It entails using the same skills and tactics on the road that kept them alive throughout the novel. However, the man’s ‘road methodology’ also did

not work: they did not find life at the coast *and* he has now died. Further, he admits his teleology failed; why would the boy follow the same path? This would relegate him to the same mistakes that inevitably conclude not just in the man's death but the death of the planet as well. More importantly, the boy has already proven he is not governed by the same rigidity. Though the man assures the boy that "goodness" will find him, the reality is the road does not lead them anywhere, really, aside from further down the road. The boy's savior—the new man—observes him from *off* the road and approaches him. First, he warns him against continuing on the highway. "If you stay," he says with the authority of a survivor, encouraging the boy *not* to stay with his father's body but to follow him, "you need to keep out of the road" (283). The road is a dangerous space. More importantly, though, it is an unsustainable route: it only leads to more ruin. "I don't know how you made it this far" the new man says (283). With his dying breath, the boy's father still cannot imagine a hopeful resolution off road; the new man already knows the road has no hopeful resolution.

The new man signals an ethical and textual divergence from petro-affect on the road. He advises the boy to stay off the road for his own personal safety, but he also wants him to consider going off road permanently. Finally, the boy is offered an alternative: "You got two choices here... You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me" (283). The boy can die on the road like his father or he can veer off the highway—"or you can go with me" is purposefully vague, but it is clearly a departure from the road and petroculture. The boy seeks wonders whether the new man is one of the "good guys," but readers can see he is for two reasons. First, he assures the boy that he and his small group, including two children, do not eat people—the truth of which is marked on his intact body, if we compare this new man to the lone marauder with his missing fingers. Second, he fulfills an early promise to the boy, wrapping his

papa in a blanket despite the clear waste of resource. This proves him to be trustworthy, but also shows he helps others. When the boy goes to say goodbye, he finds “he was wrapped in a blanket as the man had promised” (286). This “promise” compared to the father’s “warrant” implies a different ideology, one where the story is matched by action. The “promise” fosters a relationship with the boy, coexists with him, rather than imposing an ethical framework. The new man is not possessed by material accumulation. Even more importantly, he is concerned for the boy’s emotional state as well as his physical health. The new man wraps him in a blanket and assures him he will wait for him in the road while he says goodbye (285-286). Rather than rhetorical fantasy, the new man shows compassion and empathy for others through action. The new man’s humanitarian efforts align more with the boy’s evolving ethical structure. While the boy cries “for a long time,” the new man waits patiently for him. The boy’s grief is an emotional release. Likewise, it is another convergence of affect and petroculture: the boy’s emotional release, his grief at the loss of his father, is also a final valediction of the road. The boy is not only saying goodbye to the man: he is saying goodbye to the road, to his life of itinerant migrancy shaped by petroculture. This one moment of true sorrow suggests *The Road* holds some hope, even if the road is hopeless.

When the characters and narrative shaped by the road are finally able to move beyond the limitations of petroculture, the text can break from its own strict conventions. The novel ends with something akin to natural annals. More of a memorial than a memory, the narrative shifts away from the road and ends in the mountains:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their

backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing that could not be put back. Could not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

(287)

These are the very same mountains the man and the boy traverse early in the novel, though they bear no resemblance beyond topology. The passage begins with native life, the brook trout, to construct a biomic image that counters that of eco-apocalypse. Further, the passage evokes sensual perceptions (vision, olfaction, somatosensation) that indicate the value and agency of non-human life, stark contrast to the affectual shape of the preceding text. The “amber current” and white-edged fins are not the gray, dark colors that dominate the novel. The trouts’ shining bodies coursing water through the water and muscular movements in the speaker’s hands are what Seigworth and Gregg describe as “persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and amongst the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (1). These are fish so deeply immersed within the ecosystem they smell of the earthy moss that grows throughout the stream’s current. The speaker’s contact with the fish, and thus the reader’s exposure to them, is not determinative, but exists alongside the fish. The world described is not defined by the human, but by the “deep glens” that are “older than man” (287). This world is not—or does not have to be—the Anthropocene. The fish reminds the reader not only of what was absent from the novel, but what we can lose.

McCarthy specifically adopts the brook trout as the symbol of the region. Brook trout are the only native species of trout to the central Appalachian Smokey Mountain region where the majority of *The Road* takes place (National Park Service). Ecologically, they fulfill an essential role within the biome, particularly feeding upon the region’s insect populations (invasive

rainbow trout are bigger and eat too many). Within the passage, we feel *affectually* that the trout belong in that ecosystem. They are made for the mountain stream, just as the stream is made for them. What is more, over the last half-century, brook trout populations have declined throughout central Appalachia due to invasive species, habitat loss, and stream acidification. In fact, the NPS states that brook trout have lost “approximately 75% of their native range in the park,” now limited to “about 133 miles of park streams” (National Park Service). Logging and invasive rainbow trout have had a major impact throughout the 20th century, but issues of stream acidification have become increasingly problematic. Air pollution, the result of emissions from coal power plants, automobile exhaust, and industrial factories, is released into the ecosystem through acid rain. The rain will not irritate humans, but the impact upon streams is immense. The brook trout, then, explicitly conveys the magnitude of slow violence: a localized paradigm of petro-modernity’s global consequence that is current and measurable.

Cannibalism is spectacle. It compels an emotional reaction from the reader, while taking consumption-out-of-control to its farthest limits. How far would one go to remain living? Would we sacrifice the brook trout? And if so, is humanity really worth trying to preserve? This is to say: even if abject horror in *The Road* seems somehow unimaginable to modern petro-consumers, the text anticipates and comments upon ecological catastrophes that are not only possible but occurring in our present. The brook trout is the canary-in-the-coal-mine, an indicator of slow violence that humanity is not only aware of, but aware of the human species as the root cause of (National Park Service). The brook trout takes the shape of a portent, an omen of what our future could look like and how that loss might *feel*.

The brook trout evokes two distinct responses: either humanity can correct course and live more sustainably in balance with the environment, or humans and all organic species are

already doomed and cannot “be made right again” (287). *The Road* dwells upon the second, bleaker response, asking how one might live an ethical life while inhabiting a dying world. We see that ethical reorientation in the boy: in his self-sacrifice, his compassion, but most of all in his empathy. Additionally, the loss and devastation of the novel are in some ways revelatory. The “vermiculate patterns” on the brook trouts’ backs “were maps of the world in its becoming,” but maps that we have forgotten how to read. We replace the mysterious “maps and mazes” of nature with oilcompany maps and in the process lose contact with those parts of our organic selves dredged out of the muck of creation. As he’s dying, the man thinks to himself, “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (274). The movement to nothingness, the counterspectacle to an organic world leaves the reader ruminating on the cyclical nature of birth and rebirth. Truly to understand the construction of a thing is truly to respect the thing itself. Deconstructing the planet, then, leaves some hope for constructing a new planet. The coast may be polluted, the oceans ashen, yet the waves keep crashing. In witnessing the destruction of the world, there is some distant faith in regeneration. Though he and the boy will not observe it, the novel leaves room for epochal hope.

The first and more evocative response to the novel’s final passage, that the trout’s future is motivation to radically alter consumptive patterns, asks the reader to profoundly reorient environmental contact, to embody something akin to the boy’s strangeness or Morton’s coexistence. *The Road* posits that if there is some resolution to eco-apocalypse, it lies off the road in a more natural domain, out of oil and in water. This means changing our relationship to and consumption of natural resources. But perhaps even more importantly, it means trying to read the right maps. If the novel restructures systems of value and worth, the brook trout is

beyond compare. It is irreplaceable, a remarkably beautiful lifeform that once gone “could not be put back” (287). Despite the limitations on their ecosystem, brook trout still live in the Appalachian Mountains. We are obligated to better stewardship if we do not want the brook trout to become a memorial. Venturing off road (geographically, culturally, socioeconomically) is an opportunity to appreciate the vitality of living things—at the same time acknowledging the fragility of life itself. While this seems the more valuable thought experiment, it is clearly the more difficult path. The tentacular nature of petroculture stretches into the farthest reaches of our petro-modernity. In evoking the horrors of eco-apocalypse, cannibalism, and climate destabilization in *The Road*, McCarthy asks readers/consumers to measure the challenges of shifting away from petro-modernity against the obsolescence threatened by inaction. According to our present course, this is *the* road. There are, however, alternatives to the road. We decide which route to travel.

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